

# Evoked: A Historical, Theoretical, and Cultural Analysis of Africana Arts

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## Evoked: A Historical, Theoretical, and Cultural Analysis of Africana Dance and Theatre; Volume 1 Issue 1

Ofosuwa Abiola

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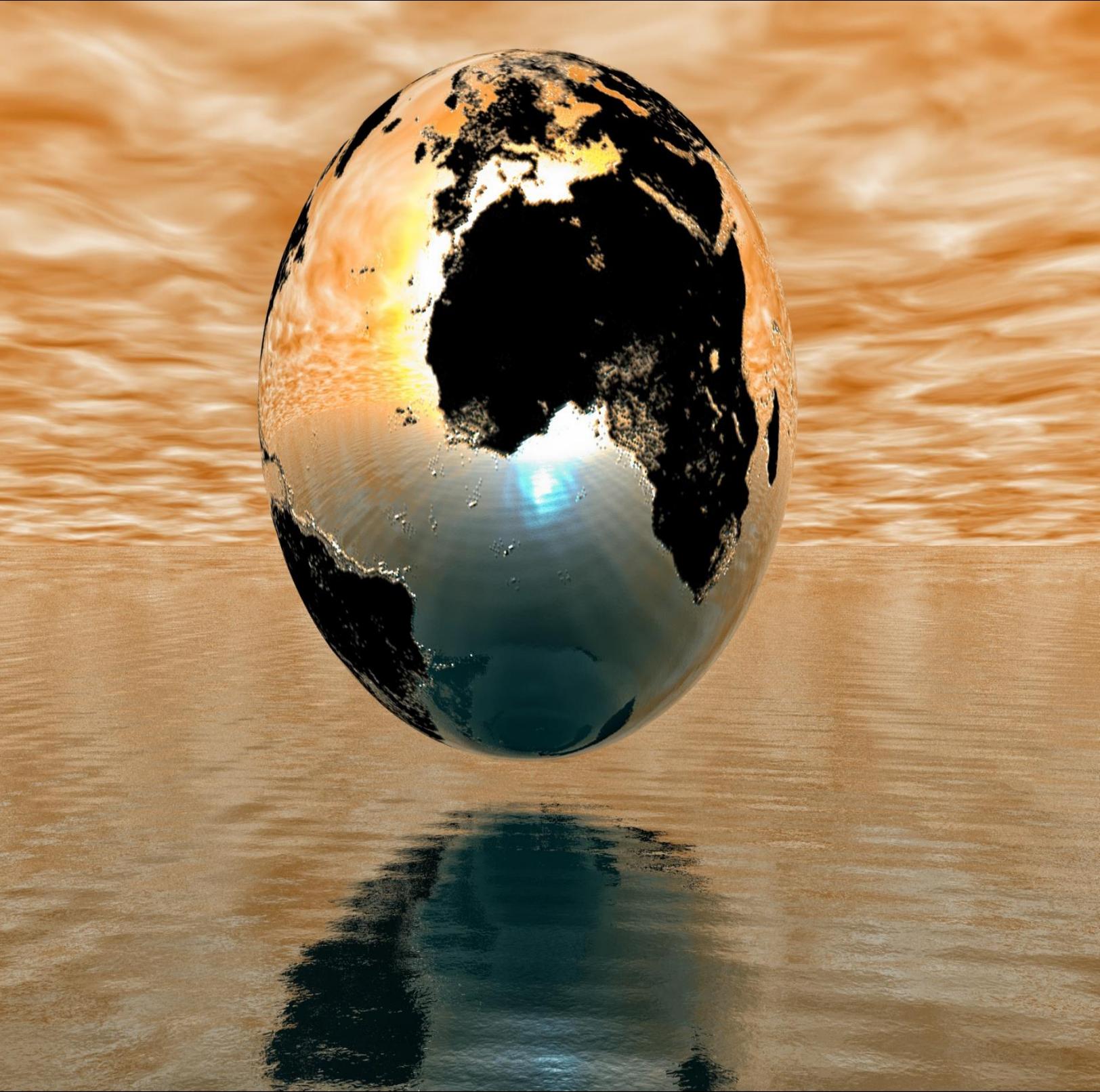
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*Evolve*

A Historical, Theoretical, and Cultural Analysis of Africana Dance & Theatre

Volume 1 Issue 1 (2019)

Crossing Borders

# Evoked: A Historical, Theoretical and Cultural Analysis of Africana Dance and Theatre

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## A Note From the Editor

Ofosuwa M. Abiola, Ph.D.  
Editor-in-Chief

### Like A Bulldozer Crushing A Wall

A border can be perceived as a boundary. Whether it is ideological, visual, or emotional, the border emphasizes a division. Some borders unforgivingly prohibit passage to the other side, relegating, in the case of ideology or praxis, two phenomena to retain their separateness. Fortunately, time and again, Africana dance, ideology, and praxis has proven to be comparable to a bulldozer crushing a wall with regard to the ineffectiveness of restriction on this dance form. Africana dance cannot be constrained. The Africana dance form Hip Hop, and the culture that accompanies it, is a case in point. Hip-hop dance has become a global phenomenon, or a boundary crusher. Its practice can be witnessed on the internet in Africa, Europe, Asia, South America, the Caribbean, and its birthplace, the United States. Hip-hop emerged as a result of the experiences of people of African descent in America. However, the narratives that it conveys cannot be contained within the borders of America because they are familiar to people of African descent in all areas of the globe. Borders have historically been a nonfactor with regard to the proliferation, application, and praxis of Africana dance specifically, and Africana performance arts in general.

The theme, of this issue, “Crossing Borders,” seeks to interrogate Africana dances that have boundlessly enriched the lives of people in territories at home and places other than where the artform originated. The narratives these dances convey are diverse and are relevant to people exponentially far from their base of origin while simultaneously resonating with their progenitors. However, they are not static. Thus, new narratives can and are continuously infused in Africana dance forms.

In this issue of *Evoke*, Sara Soanirina Ohmer’s “In the Beginning was Body Language’: Clowning and Krump as Spiritual Healing and Resistance,” accentuates the fluidity of a perceived static border representing the division between marginalization and acceptance, agency and victimization. Through Krump dancing, which hails from the Hip Hop style of Africana dance, Black bodies become the repository for collective memories, and thus the solution to oppression. As Gail A. McFarland illustrates in her enlightening treatise, “Dancing Thru Déjà vu,” the borders between the tangible and the ideological are repeatedly addressed through engagement with Africana dance. McFarland sheds light on the capacity of Africana dance to interrogate societal constructed notions of gender and masculinity through a critical analysis of the performances of Hip Hop dancing twins, *Le Twins*.

The conference proceedings of The Nankama African Dance Conference are also displayed in this issue of *Evoke*. The Nankama African Dance Conference (NADC) was a two-day engagement in Africana performance scholarship and African and African diaspora dance and drum workshops. The theme of this year's conference was *Dancing Identity*. On the first day of the NADC scholars from diverse regions of the country including California, Florida, New York, Chicago, Connecticut and locally in Washington, DC and Maryland, gathered to share their research on Africana Dance. There were 10 papers, two performances, and a Screendance viewing followed by a talkback. The second day of the NADC was packed with African and African Diaspora dance and drum workshops. The Guest artist was the world-renowned Moustapha Bangoura with over 30 years of performance and teaching experience, and former principle dancer of the illustrious Les Ballets Africains. Moustapha Bangoura taught two master workshops featuring dances that hailed from the Mandinka/Susu ethnic groups. Howard University's own, Assane Konte, a Senegalese national, master teacher, and co-founder of the celebrated Kankouran West African Dance Company in Washington, DC, taught two Sabar workshops of the Wolof ethnic group. The widely celebrated Alberto Limonta Perez taught two Afro-Cuban dance workshops and an Afro-Cuban drum workshop. Three other West African drum workshops were taught by Farafina Kan's Mahiri Keita. In all, there were 6 African and African diaspora dance workshops and 4 African and African diaspora drum workshops. Conference participants danced from 9:00 AM to 8:30 PM, and drummed from 9:00 AM to 4:30 PM.

NADC was sponsored by Howard University's dance program and Djole Arts Association, Inc. It was funded in part by the Center for African Studies/US Department of Education, and the Department of World Languages and Culture at Howard University.

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## Dancing Thru Déjà vu

Gail A. McFarland, Georgia State University

### Abstract

Ideas surrounding the black male body are well-suited to examining hip hop dance through its racial and populist origins, as an authentic art form. The working of déjà vu, operating in the narrative space between new media and live performance, opens a continuum of race, class, and gender connections, while interrogating bodily experience and cultural trauma residing in the flesh. Within that same space, hip hop dance invokes both internal and external memory, visible through its fascination with the black dancing body. Through a critical performance analysis of hip hop dance stars, *Les Twins*, this study centers competitive black male hip hop dancers through the hypervisibly violent, gender-bound, racially invested performances of masculinity associated with hip hop culture and the notion that as commodity competition, the element of déjà vu is raised by the visual staging of “ideal” masculinity.

*Les Twins*, Laurent Nicolas and Larry Nicolas Bourgeois are twin brothers and a performing dance team. Afro-French nationals, the brothers are internationally known for their innate talents of bodily interpretation and translation of narrative through physical form. Practiced, albeit self-taught, the brothers’ movement is graceful and fluid, and not altogether different from that of classical ballet dancers who practice their light and fluid movements in pointe shoes, reflective of a distinct artistic mode and historical place in time. Like classical ballet dancers, the practiced fluidity of movement and balance of *Les Twins* is based in stamina, musicality, memory retention, and their historical place in time. Unlike classical ballet dancers, the form and costume of *Les Twins*’ fantastic dance practice is not found in the class-biased history of pointe shoes. Instead, streetwear and high-end sneakers raise the stakes of race, culture and class that dictate the broken formality found in hip hop dance.

Hip hop, born from the 1970s Brooklyn, New York “house party” scene, is a relative newcomer to musical discipline and theory, but the music has spawned its own formal, socially commodified dance tradition in the form of hip hop dance. Contemporary hip-hop dance is an art form with roots in revolutionary philosophy and African social dance that allowed enslaved Africans to keep cultural traditions alive and retain a sense of inner freedom. Its postmodernism comes not from fighting against a broken system, but from its fragmented, referential, rhythm-focused aesthetic. In the space of social dancing, hip hop embraces its history and “street” pedigree through constant innovative movement,

while resisting a documentary form of repetition and respite in classical dance forms, forms that would serve to dehistoricize both the performing body and the event of the dance. Bearing cultural markers of musicality, style, costume, and performance, hip hop dance also bears the social and politicized history and features of social dancing, and “[b]lack social dances contain dual transcripts of ‘public’ and ‘private’ meaning. These transcripts mirror constructions of outwardly entertaining and secretly derisive rhetoric articulated by black cultural theorists including W.E.B. DuBois at the turn of the century.”<sup>1</sup>

Thomas DeFrantz uses the notion of cultural literacy, essential to understanding the ‘public’ and ‘private’ meanings of social dance, as a reference for performer ability to understand and participate fluently in the public meanings of hip hop as black social dance and public entertainment, while also understanding the private meaning of hip hop dance as being saturated with experience and complexities that evade easy affiliations, or historical definitions and understandings that influence the exchange between the dancers, their community, and spectators.<sup>2</sup> The assertion of anthropologist Roger Abrahams that “a split [of performance meaning occurs] along lines of cultural literacy [through which] Black performers constantly recognize that the very performance that is conventional within the black community will be seen as strange, as pleasantly exotic to the hipster,”<sup>3</sup> is useful in extending DuBois’ claim of social dance as an affirmation of identity and independence.

Hip hop dance features three basic styles: breaking, popping, and locking. The irregularities of hip hop dance evolution include street dance derivatives such as, Memphis jookin’, turfing, jerkin’, tutting, and krumping. What distinguishes hip-hop from other forms of dance is the highly improvisational nature of its movement, especially when employed in competitive “battle” mode. In the context of black social dance, hip hop dance becomes an actively reified form of black culture, whose individual movements are described in terms of bodily conflict, such as being hard hitting, slamming, brutal, and crushing.

Because of the physicality of hip hop dance and its dramatically racial and populist origins, the idea of trauma and the black male body are well-suited to examining this dance form as an authentic art form, through the working of *déjà vu*. Moreover, as imagined by Alexander, because *déjà vu* operates in the narrative space between nationally televised videotape and [live performance, opening] an avenue to think about what various national imaginations – primarily racially determined but also marked by region class, gender – bring to the viewing [and raising] questions concerning how bodily experience, both individually experienced... as well as cultural trauma comes to reside in the flesh as forms of memory reactivated and articulated at moments of collective spectatorship.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> DeFrantz, Thomas F. "The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power." MIT - Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT, 2014, [www.web.mit.edu/people/defrantz/Documents/BackBeat.PDF](http://www.web.mit.edu/people/defrantz/Documents/BackBeat.PDF), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Alexander, E. ""Can you be Black and Look at This?": Reading the Rodney King Video(s)." *Public Culture*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1994, p. 80, doi:10.1215/08992363-7-1-77.

In her article, “Can You be Black and Look at This?” Elizabeth Alexander considers this language and, by association, the violent and critically animated movement associated with hip hop as a throwback to events witnessed during enslavement as “corporeal images” of abuse and violence, witnessed and reported, and recorded in memory, thus “becoming knowledge. This knowledge is necessary [for survival and] suggest(s) that ‘experience’ can be taken into the body via witnessing and recorded in memory as knowledge.”<sup>5</sup> For Alexander, hip hop dance and the bodies of the dancers can exist as sites of cultural déjà vu and reenacted witnessing of historical black bodily experience. When Alexander asks, “what do the scenes of communally witnessed violence in slave narratives tell us about the way that text is inscribed in African American flesh?” she speaks to invisible traces of racial memory, hidden in “memorial space-time.” As the trace memories are accessed, “witnessing can be aural as well as ocular [and], those who receive stories become witnesses once removed, but witnesses nonetheless.”<sup>6</sup> Within the space of hip hop dance, memory is both hidden and imposed in the body of the dancer because “the dancing black body routinely arouses extraordinary wariness and fascination.”<sup>7</sup>

As performers able to engage the myth and lore of twinship and twoness in performance, there is an *a priori* expectation that the dancing black bodies of *Les Twins* “operate out of a kind of double consciousness, knowing that they are called upon to present an image which will be interpreted as exotic to the outside world” expected of Black performing bodies.<sup>8</sup> In presenting the exotic images of hip hop dance through televised competition, *Les Twins* translate the cultural literacy that DuBois and DeFrantz assign to black social dance through the machinery of television, allowing camera location, image size, reproducibility, access, sound and lyrical content, and replay to complicate black masculinity.

Cultural theorist Russell A. Potter considers hip hop culture as a postmodern witnessing of culture because, as a cultural formation, it “inhabit[s] moments of resistance, situated both in and as ‘breaks’ in progressive time... [with] intrinsic structures [that] constitute both a counter aesthetic and counter-ethos to the fuzzy humanism of many modernist movements... [These moments] are more accurately described as postmodern. In particular, even within black modernisms, there has been... ‘both an imaginary anti-modern past and a post-modern yet-to-come.’”<sup>9</sup> Potter argues that within those moments, “the chronological bifurcation analogous to double consciousness... constitutes the core of a full-blown postmodern sensibility... particular to black expressive arts.”<sup>10</sup> When, within the context of “a post-modern yet-to-come,” Potter also evokes W.E.B DuBois’s 1903 theory of double consciousness as a sort of déjà vu, which describes “a peculiar sensation... this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others... [and

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<sup>5</sup> Alexander, 83.

<sup>6</sup> Alexander, 81.

<sup>7</sup> DeFrantz, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>9</sup> Potter, Russell A. "Introduction -- Coming to Terms: Rap Music as Radical Postmodernism." In *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism*, 4. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 4.

through which] One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body,"<sup>11</sup> he situates a particular state to a moment of black history. When he connects that moment of historically witnessed blackness to "an imaginary anti-modern past and a post-modern yet-to-come," Potter also connects hip hop culture to a particular kind and moment of déjà vu. Understanding that the experience and culture of hip hop is drawn from enslavement, and that "the historical experience of slavery makes a fundamental difference in the cultural and philosophical modes of expression in black cultures," Potter<sup>12</sup> also makes a space for the déjà vu associated with specific diasporic black cultural practices, when they are understood as referring to the cultural connections maintained by a group of people who have been dispersed or who have migrated around the globe, as Africans in the Americas through enslavement.

Elizabeth Alexander further situates the space for déjà vu by reading it against "...the prevalence of anti-essentialist, post-identity discourses... the bottom line here is that different groups possess sometimes-subconscious collective memories which are frequently forged and maintained through a storytelling tradition [that extends itself to dance and ritual movement], however difficult that may be to pin down, as well as through individual experience. When a black man can be set on fire amidst racial epithets in the street because he inhabits a black body... there must be a place for theorizing black bodily experience..."<sup>13</sup>

Déjà vu is frequently considered to be the impression that a currently experienced place or event has been experienced in the past, leading to an uncanny sense of awareness that subtly exists in a space between physical and emotional perception. In *Déjà vu: Aberrations of Cultural Memory*,<sup>14</sup> Peter Krapp holds that the phenomenon of déjà vu is a kind of "memory without memory, a kind of forgetting without forgetting."<sup>15</sup> Regarding déjà vu as possessing a unique structural spatiotemporal ability that deforms and displaces memory, Krapp argues that disturbances of déjà vu, accessed through false recognition, involuntary individual and collective memories, or screen memories, can overcome technologically imposed detachment to both modern experience and past historical experiences.<sup>16</sup> Within the black community, these memories are accessible through iterations of gender, colorism, narrative, and repetition of tradition.<sup>17</sup>

To explain the phenomena of déjà vu Krapp employs Walter Benjamin's lens of tedious familiarity,<sup>18</sup> but at "the core of the experience déjà vu represents something that it tends to cover over: it can show itself as an inversion of common assumptions about the

<sup>11</sup> DuBois, William E. B. "Of Our Spiritual Strivings." In *The Souls of Black Folk*, 3. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1994.

<sup>12</sup> Potter, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander, 80.

<sup>14</sup> Krapp, Peter. *Déjà Vu: Aberrations of Cultural Memory*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>17</sup> hooks, bell. "Performance Practice as a Site of Opposition." In *Let's get it on: the politics of Black performance*, edited by Catherine Ugwu, 210-221. Bay Press, 1995.

<sup>18</sup> Krapp, 31.

perception of time and space.”<sup>19</sup> In referencing the presence of the future in the past, Benjamin’s notion of *déjà vu* is useful in referencing the position of the black experience as associated with hip hop dance, when he suggests that the phenomenon operates through timelines that are not linked solely to a single individual or group. Instead, Benjamin’s concern holds that future resonances are to be found in the “[h]istorical knowledge gained from a past that is not fixed, but open toward the future.”<sup>20</sup> This is a significant notion when attached to the culture and memory of diasporic cultural dispersion, and DuBois’s definition of double consciousness.

Krapp theorizes that as technology accesses and replicates historical moments and memories, it has the power to define them. In seizing the culturally vulnerable identity of moments and memories, Krapp suggests that the technology attached to new media creates an abnormal sense of *déjà vu*, through which the resulting shifted anomalous memories have the power to impact human agency by normalizing singularities surrounding collective and individual cultural memories.<sup>21</sup> Alexander considers that specific memories will “stay forever with those who saw them, knowing as they did that their fate was bound up in a system of domination and violence to bodies and to memory... a case for a collective memory that rests in the present moment... activated by watching... videotape.”<sup>22</sup>

The aberration of witnessing, even against the claim of bodily knowledge, is caused by technology’s harnessing and replicating the feeling of *déjà vu* through incessant repetition and the control that casts an “auratic spell” of the already familiar onto cultural memory. Krapp’s concern and caveat is that if true cultural memory becomes supplanted by memories generated through technological repetition, the resulting *déjà vu* experience will reflect a constant deviation of cultural memory. Krapp also finds that technologically imposed *déjà vu* can disrupt conditions embodied in cultural memory, resulting in an attempt to return to the “first perceptions of [the] uncontrollable effects of uncanny recognition.”<sup>23</sup>

Leaning heavily on Benjamin, Krapp suggests that active moments of resistance to technological repetition are possible through “willful, voluntary recollection that makes the object disappear... [so that] *déjà vu* allows the memory to persist and reappear when the time is ripe...” Krapp indicates that although technology is capable of hiding “memorial space-time” and the objects it contains, technology leaves clues behind; Benjamin defines this as “the leaving of invisible traces,”<sup>24</sup> found in the ways that memories are concealed in spatiotemporal “interstices and chasms,” used for “filling in” obvious spaces with their “height and depth” challenging observation.

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<sup>19</sup> Krapp, 32.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>22</sup> Alexander, 84.

<sup>23</sup> Krapp, *xxiii*.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

Differently, however, as déjà vu pushes memory through hip hop dance, it operates with a double inversion of space and time, permanently complicating the oppositions between 'I' and 'Me'. To examine the double inversion of space and time, it is necessary to pull déjà vu from its hiding place within technology. A useful way of doing this is to examine how déjà vu works with digitally produced national television dance competitions that tend to blur the line between auratic art and authentic art, as a part of their dedication to commodified collective and cultural memory. Memory and déjà vu are further engaged by virtue of the program competitors; amateur and semi-professional dancers, competing for large monetary prizes and business contracts, and all capable of delivering strange sensations through their talent and innovative dance movement.

While the competitors on "World of Dance," are both male and female, this analysis has chosen to focus on male dancers.<sup>25</sup> The reason for this is because, while black men may be "oppressed by race" outside of the black community, they are privileged by gender in the hip hop community.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, this study centers its inquiry on black male hip hop dancers because of the highly visible violent, gender-bound, racially invested performances of masculinity associated with hip hop culture, and its historic association with trauma against the black male body.

While DeFrantz implies that hip hop dance pushes back against historic trauma through "alignment of physical tension (hardness) with politicized blackness unique to the post-civil rights era," Mutua's conversation on black masculinity lends the notion there is a strong element of historical déjà vu raised by the visual blocking of black men's opportunities to attain "ideal" masculinity through hip hop dance performance.<sup>27</sup> Here, Mutua's theory of progressive masculinity serves to address the presentations of black masculinities seen on "World of Dance" (WOD), when progressive black masculinities are defined as "the unique and innovative performances of the masculine self."<sup>28</sup> With *Les Twins*, the investigation of the masculine self is doubled because the performers are identical twins, challenging déjà vu and the relationship of historic memory through oppositions between 'I' and 'Me,' – because they are visually the same, although they are logically different – thus complicating the historical relationship of black male bodies, identity, and déjà vu on a televised dance competition.

In hip hop dance competition, the body becomes an essential locus of creative action as a visual dimension of culture. DeFrantz suggests that "the dominance of a percussive concept of performance; multiple meter; apart playing and dancing; call-and-response; suspended accentuation patterning" are all visual bodily extensions of African and diasporic cultural traits, and their practice outside of "black cultural priorities" moves hip hop from "the realm of expressive social dance to commodity."<sup>29</sup> As focused competition commodity performers, the black male body is apprehended by the significant notion that

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<sup>25</sup> *World of Dance*. Produced by Jennifer Lopez, season 1, NBC, 2017.

<sup>26</sup> Mutua, Athena. "Theorizing Progressive Black Masculinities in Progressive Black Masculinities." SSRN. Last modified 2006. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=2109939>.

<sup>27</sup> DeFrantz, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Mutua, 22-23.

<sup>29</sup> DeFrantz, 14.

whether self-posed or aggressively reduced to an object of looking, it functions as a complex study in the phenomenology of black embodiment and cultural dispositions.<sup>30</sup> As black male performers in a public space, *Les Twins* are purveyors of “the black fantastic,” which Richard Iton considers to be deliberately provocative in nature and bodily disposition, and suggestive of something wicked, magical and deliciously sinful. “The black fantastic” is also seen as a witty, subversive play on dark narratives and the fetishization of skin tone. Iton considers the “fantastic” to exist as a racial and spatial positioning of the other, and subject to the uncanny subjectivity of *déjà vu*.<sup>31</sup>

The dance style of *Les Twins* is generally categorized as New Style hip hop, recognized as a commercial form of the dance that applies strong emphasis on physical isolations and musicality. New Style is a commodified dance industry response to the popularity and expanse of hip hop; as a style, the dance form appears in dance studios, rap and other popular music videos, and on concert stages. Known for impeccable timing and their unique ability to anticipate each other’s moves, *Les Twins* have gained a widely appreciated reputation for making the freestyle movement that marks hip hop take on the refined lines of choreography – an innovation that they refer to as “twin-style.” This ability, lodged in the uncanny doubling of twin-ship and arguably, aspects of *déjà vu* that allow the dancers to anticipate and coordinate their movement also affords the dancers a marketable skill as performers, models, and world class dance instructors, in the wake of their successful 2017 WOD competition.

An intense sense of artistic presence, on the part of *Les Twins*, makes the WOD performance selected for analysis into a single, yet joint, personal statement on their commonly shared embodied experience. *Les Twins* present the black male body as an artistic device with a surplus of meaning, responsible for embodying a diasporic history of enslavement and commodification that it can never escape remembering. Nothing in the digitally recorded performance is random, thus making the dancers and celebrity judges part of a larger discourse that complicates the reading of the images. The images respond by stepping into memory, beyond the aesthetic gaze, and inviting the spectator to identify symbols, signs, traces of criticism, and reworkings of inherited representation. The digitally captured performance to be analyzed appeared on WOD in July, 2017.<sup>32</sup> The hip hop song for the performance, “Never Know,” by 6LACK, a singer, songwriter, and rapper from Atlanta, Georgia, was chosen by *Les Twins*. The sound is diegetic, and the multi-racial audience knows this because of the dancer’s response to rhythm and lyrics – their synchronized and broken synchrony respond to the sound as do the dancer’s faces; occasional breaks or silences in the music, work to create tension, disorient viewers, break body movement, and foreshadow moments of physical connection and awareness. WOD uses a “seating in the round,” placement for its audiences, providing 365° of visual access to the performers. This seating arrangement means that as cameras capture dancer performance, they are also able to incidentally and accidentally capture audience

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<sup>30</sup> Alexander, 1994.

<sup>31</sup> Iton, Richard. *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture in the Post-Civil Rights Era*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Lopez, Jennifer. "World of Dance 2017 – Les Twins: The Cut (Full Performance)." *YouTube*. July 25, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KzRH8ps9djk>.

visuals, as well. As a result, the audience is as much affected by knowing that they might be viewed onscreen as they are by their placement in the broadcast studio and their access to celebrity judges. DeFrantz also considers audience reaction that centers an “audience for African Americans [or other diasporic blacks] includes whites who are not conversant with submerged layers of communication”<sup>33</sup> found in the performance of black male hip hop dancers.

However, whether “the audience ‘understand[s]’ the performance [of hip hop as] black social dance” or not, “the presupposition of a doubled functionality [is] encoded within the performance.”<sup>34</sup> The phenomenon of *déjà vu* suggests that this doubling of meaning does not disappear without a white audience because of the private and personal meanings encoded into black social dancing and the sibling relationship between identical twins, whose physical existence delivers meaning that has the ability to cross and redouble itself, based in kinship and race, similarly, the dance meaning doubles back on itself as it becomes different in blackness, while remaining the same performance for an audience that will not define it in whiteness.<sup>35</sup>

Costuming is an integral part of the dancer's twin “spirit,” but also works to frame the urban context of hip hop, inscriptions of black masculinity, and movement across lines of diasporic culture. Designed to place the dancers into hip hop consumerism, while reflecting on masculinity standing outside of traditional artistic dance, the dancer's shoes are functional and casual, but expensive “street wear,” a direct difference from the dance-specific shoes of ballet or other studio dance. Similarly attired, the dancer outfits are visually identical until closely inspected, revealing a tailored shirt as opposed to a tee shirt, and black jackets, one cloth and the other leather. There is also a difference in jewelry, and while both twins wear longer natural hair, it is fashioned in markedly different configurations. The costumes of choice look backward through time, triggering the childhood memories of twins dressed alike, while the clothing also looks forward to the “thuggish” expectations of young black men, even as it forces open a time/space moment that looks back at brute notions of black masculinity from a current space of national television.

There is no particular memorial time/space link indicated for this performance, outside of the dancers’ bodies and clothing, contributing to the postmodern ethos noted by Potter.<sup>36</sup> As the performance opens, the LED stage, programmed to follow dance performances with light, is shadowed in moody shades of blue with white highlights, offering an essential neo-noir tone to the otherwise empty stage. The film noir ethos extends to the dance floor, which is patterned to simulate the hard lines, wet pavement, neon, and urbanity tropes of the film style – all appropriate to the hardness of the music that grounds the performance. The noir ethos extends itself to memories of the predominately black and white film style that employed crime narratives that consciously avoided race, while triggering connection of the English translation of the word noir (black) to the race of the Afro French dancers.

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<sup>33</sup> DeFrantz, 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-4.

<sup>36</sup> Potter, 4-7.

In the analysis piece, it should be noted that the dancers begin and end in the same positions they originally held, but on opposite sides of the frame. This is one of the “tricks” of technology that Krapp aspires to break. Appearing on opposite sides of the frame stresses *Les Twins* relationship to themselves, to each other, the space they inhabit, and time, as they return to the space of their beginning as mirror images of themselves. Interestingly, the similarity of the beginning and ending poses on the darkened stage mimics the posture and configuration of twin babies *in utero*. The side-by-side connection, though they are facing in opposite directions, expresses the language of the dance style and the connection of the dancers to one another, signifying the “I am Me” or “You are Me” or even, “We are Us,” all declarations of identity.

When *Les Twins* move clockwise, marking time, they mirror and counterbalance each other, shaping stage space through movement that creates identity, using the uncanny sense of *déjà vu* as a narrative defining elements found in the high and low positions of their bodies as they move across the stage, the high position of performance juxtaposed against the low position used to begin and end the performance, all of which contain meaning and may even be seen as containing a birth and death motif, with the death aspect being linked to the eeriness of the twin-inspired presence of the *doppelgänger*.

Using the double motif of the *doppelgänger* as a site of comparison and contrast between opposing forces, and the divide in self, *Les Twins* capitalize on the strange sensation related to the *doppelgänger* through speed and sharpness of movement. Frequently mirrored, but on different planes, the dancers’ intentionally destabilize their visible representations of “I” and “Me.” Because the dancers move in sync, though not always as a “matched pair,” their dance places them in the position of leaving persistent traces of the “other,” while creating a personal hip hop situated identity.

*Déjà vu* and the forming of disjointed memory are also visibly reflected in the “ticking” dance movements that mimic stop-motion animation, and visually changes the dancers’ relationship to time, sound, and audience gaze. Simulated “freeze framing” has the effect of stopping or breaking time. It also “others” the dancer bodies by placing them outside of the “real” and into the “surreal,” thus altering spectator relationship and expectations. The dancers constantly operate in different planes, never in a straight line, but always operating through shifting lines of closeness and distance. *Déjà vu* evoked in self-aware moments when one twin, or the other, breaks character to touch his twin, opening a time/space memorial interstice, jarring the viewer with the knowledge that although the twins are in *this* moment, it is both a rehearsed and technologically recorded moment that has occurred in the past, could occur in the moment, as a live broadcast, and will live on in reruns and YouTube views. Further, the touch reminds the viewer and the brother of the actual connection between the brothers. This casual touch also “others” the dancers and their hip hop style, in the sense Fanon describes of how the black body is “made into an ontological problem in relation to the white gaze.”<sup>37</sup> The dance thus anticipates the black fantastic, and the exotic sensation evoked by the doubling of black male bodies.

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<sup>37</sup> Yancy, George. "The Return of the Black Body: Seven Vignettes." In *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race in America*, 2nd ed., 71. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

In *Practices of Looking*, Sturken and Cartwright indicate that although the gaze is not tangibly physical, “the gaze is integral to systems of power and ideas about knowledge.”<sup>38</sup> WOD subjects participants, audiences, celebrity judges, and even the camera so as to occupy multiple gazes that work to judge and commodify mise-en-scene, as well as all commercial sponsorship. As an apparatus of power, WOD uses multiple cameras able to access close up and extreme close up, full body, overhead, tracking, and zoom shots of dancers, the audiences and the celebrity judges, subjecting them all to a masculine gaze, because the nature of television programming is voyeurism and scopophilia – both excellent reasons for intercutting judge's faces as reaction shots during televised competition.

Because of the phenomenology of déjà vu, camera position has the ability to locate “the phenomenological return of the black body, in terms of the structure of the white gaze, which overdetermines and humiliates the black body, causing it to be 'returned as distorted',”<sup>39</sup> thus leading to the fabulous, grotesque, uncanny and unsettling movement experienced by viewers. The vision of the fabulous and uncanny leads to further “othering” of dancers and their origins. Fanon's description of how the black body is “made into an ontological problem in relation to the white gaze”<sup>40</sup> is useful to describe the anticipation of the “black fantastic,” expecting the black male body to perform as if conceived by an unrepressed imagination – an expectation enlarged by identical twin-ship.

The gaze of *Les Twins* as a dance team is both subjective and challenging as they perform their twin-style dancing, where they seem to share one mind that shifts the subjectivity of “I” and “Me” between the two bodies. As a subjective gaze belonging to the thinking subject rather than to the object of thought, this is seen in the self-aware moments where one twin breaks character to touch his brother. Through the oppositional gaze, and open address of the camera, the twins are able to offer a critique of the camera's gaze, while delivering the disturbing mirrored persistent traces of the “other” as they challenge the camera to follow their narrative through the exotic strangeness of their movement.

Krapp defines déjà vu as singular and unrepeatable; Benjamin defines déjà vu as tedious and not merely that which has already been seen; Elizabeth Alexander suggests an attachment of déjà vu to the communal memory that animates everyday life. Each of these definitions speaks to déjà vu, operating in the narrative space between new media and live performance, and the continuum of race, class, and gender interrogated through bodily experience and trauma residing in the flesh. Within that same space, the art of hip hop dance invokes both internal and external memory, visible through its fascination with the black dancing body and the form of black social dance.

In observing the phenomenology of déjà vu, pressed against historical memory, the black male body in hip hop dance competition has shown that the black body can be seen as a site of resistance through the subversion of its place in the “black fantastic.” With origins

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<sup>38</sup> Sturken, Marita, and Lisa Cartwright. "Spectatorship, Power, and Knowledge: The gaze." In *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 76. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, USA, 2018.

<sup>39</sup>Yancy, 66.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 71.

in African dance and orature (the relationship of sound and movement), and 1970s underground urban social movement, hip hop dance critiques and situates presentations of masculinity and identity for the black male body through the use of historical déjà vu and individual and collective memory, accessed through the physicality of performance. Because of its access to the violence and social exclusion of communal memory, hip hop dance uses its own force and strangeness to define cultural identity through style and form as it situates the difference between “I” and “me” through memory and déjà vu.

The phenomenology of déjà vu in hip hop dance occurs because it sets a future-oriented anticipation in place through its use of jarring physical animation that appears to reconfigure moments outside of movement. People frequently disregard the artistry of hip hop dance, largely because of its origins and its visual and aural content, viewing it as a commodified, undisciplined low class break in talent and formal dance construction. Hip hop dance intervenes in the art of dance by creating a community around transgressive movement and regressive historic trauma<sup>41</sup>, creating and embracing an oppositional gaze that both rebels against and resists the repression of the right to engage presentations of masculinity through a dance-focused oppositional gaze.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> DeFrantz, 2-3.

<sup>42</sup> hooks, 210-221.

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# “In the Beginning was Body Language” Clowning and Krump as Spiritual Healing and Resistance

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## Abstract

In the neighborhood of HollyWatts in Los Angeles, dance allows a shift from existing as bodies presented as sites of threat and extinction to sources of spiritual empowerment. Clowning and Krump dancers—their subjectivity *and* their dancing bodies—negotiate survival from trauma and socioeconomic marginalization. I argue that the dancers’ performances act as embodied narratives of “re-membering in the flesh.” The performance acts as a spiritual retrieval and re-integration of traumatic memories and afflictions into memory through the body. Choreography and quotes from dancers support the claim that Krump and Clowning is “re-membering in the flesh” that enacts self-worth, self-defined sexuality, and agency for and by marginalized children and young adults. Close readings of street and staged choreography and quotes establish clear connections to Africana dance history and techniques and spiritual healing. The article includes references to the representations of the dancers’ bodies and their political voices in documentary film.

“A lot of people will think ‘oh, those kids out there are just heathen, thugs...’ No, no; what we are—  
are oppressed.”

-- Dragon, a Krump dancer

“They all had been choreographing a dance of protest and resistance, set in motion from the first day an enslaved man or woman set foot on the shore of Jamaica.”

-- Osha Pinnock

“Let’s turn to you, young poet. Know this: if you are a child of hip-hop, the simple truth is that in the beginning was the word, and the word was spoken in body language.”

--- Marc Bamuthi Joseph

## Bodies Shifting Hip Hop and Trauma Studies

Being one of the four elements of hip-hop, dance remains the least studied form of hip hop discussed or studied. The subversive function of performance is essential to hip-hop. This article discusses hip hop dance performance that promotes self-esteem, spirituality, self-defined sexuality, and agency for and by marginalized children and young adults from Los Angeles: Krump and Clowning. The ritual of style war and art of battling makes up a central component of hip-hop's culture and its evolution as a movement, in all of four elements (DJing, MCing, graffiti writing and b-boying or b-girling).<sup>43</sup> This article stops at various intersections in HollyWatts, to look at different dances that heal children, girls, and young men and women, and help them to affirm their own voices. Clowning and Krump present strategies of witnessing to and healing from Hollywatts' and other marginalized contexts' histories, shifting the body from a site of threat of extinction to a source of empowerment, with bodies at the center in order to negotiate survival from trauma. This article brings together a discussion of hip hop choreography, connected to Africana dance history and techniques, folk and staged performance dance, spirituality and sexuality, and representations of Black dancing bodies in film, specifically *RIZE* by French director David LaChapelle.<sup>44</sup>

I argue that Krump and Clowning dance work as “performance movements,” that is, performances attached to an ideology, a social movement, and spiritual activism that resists the State. Krump and Clowning have helped individuals work through and witness personal and communal trauma, enact community building and spiritual resistance. Krump and Clowning exemplify hip hop dance that works against discrimination and selective amnesia bound to questions of race, socio-economic marginalization, and gender. The dancers' performances act as embodied narratives of “re-membering flesh”—retrieval and re-integration of traumatic memories and afflictions into memory through the body. Krump and Clowning also exemplify choreographies to speak up through body language in current cultural, socioeconomic and political contexts.

## Bodies in Motion: Historical Diaspora Connections

On the birth and evolution of Krump, Dragon, one of the initial practitioners of Krump dance, shares his consciousness of the stigma that his community carries, and the contrast between that stigma and the reality that they channel through their performance: “A lot of people will think ‘oh, those kids out there are just heathen, thugs...’ No, no; what

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<sup>43</sup> The four elements of hip-hop were seen as one in the 1970s. To claim turntablism, rap, graffiti, or pop blocking as separate entities where one would be considered closer to ‘true hip hop’ than another would go against the essence of hip-hop. It cannot be hip hop unless it's four elements were practiced as one. In my study of Krump/Clowning, I will keep in mind that the dance forms part of a greater movement.

<sup>44</sup> LaChapelle, David. Dir. *RIZE*. Lions Gate Films, 2005.

we are—are oppressed.”<sup>45</sup> Their dance is more than a performance; it’s a movement of resistance to the oppression, as well as a spiritual response to the current popular African American hip-hop art scene. Krump and Clowning dancers perform with the consciousness of historical actors, and the awareness of their spirituality, agency, self-definition and self-representation as voices from their community.

Dragon also explains that in his neighborhood -“there’s no after-school programs,” and the community lacks places for youth who “[do] not play basketball or football.” He has a sense of the marginalization in relation to performance arts and the opportunities of “better neighborhoods [where] you have dance schools.”<sup>46</sup> For Dragon, Krump dancing, which he and his friends have created, challenges the limitations that they face in their community: “This is our ghetto ballet.”<sup>47</sup> This is their form of expression, a corporeal and spiritual form of empowerment and agency that defines their own form of art. It is distinct from the high art of ballet, and they mark it as a clear contribution to the African diaspora.

Osha Pinnock interprets the foundational musical experience as a cultural step in the formation of a collective yet diverse diasporic African people.<sup>48</sup> Pinnock points out how musical performance served beyond being a strategy to survive day-to-day life in bondage. It founded not only a cultural experience, but also an ideology: “They all had been choreographing a dance of protest and resistance, set in motion from the first day an enslaved man or woman set foot on the shore of Jamaica.”<sup>49</sup> The past perfect tense “had been choreographing” implies an act with conscious awareness of the consequences, and consistent effort to raise consciousness over time, initiated by enslaved men and women during the first day they stepped off the slaveship. For Pinnock, dance is associated to protest, resistance, and a collective ideological movement that originated when forced immigrants from different regions of Africa’s West Coast landed in Jamaica. This musical and ideological message was one of the first symbolic steps that enslaved women and men took on the island of Jamaica as a diasporic African people. They had been choreographing to survive.

Performance, ideology and spirituality go hand in hand in Africana dance. Krump and Clowning adapt foundational choreographies and music to promote African diasporic values of self-esteem, cultural preservation, agency, resistance and spirituality as a part of African American identities. In a way, Dragon is claiming the black body as a loud voice, and a presence, undoing what Dixon Gottschild found to be an art world where “the black dancing body was the negative space around which the white dancing body was

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<sup>45</sup> *RIZE* (Documentary, Lyons Gate Entertainment, 2005).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Unknowingly, Dragon’s remark puts him in relation to Alvin Ailey, African American ballet choreographer who strove to include African American cultural history into his choreography (Dixon Gottschild, “Black Dancing Body” 259). Dragon speaks to the same motive, but beyond the establishment of institutionalized dance.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Osha Pinnock, “Rasta and Reggae,” in *Caribbean Dance from Abakuá to Zouk: how movement shapes identity*, ed. Susanna Sloat, ed., Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2002.

<sup>49</sup> Pinnock, “Rasta and Reggae,” 96.

configured.”<sup>50</sup> Krumpers and Clowners claim that their performance aesthetic fills a spiritual gap in the Hip-Hop world that, in the late 1990s, early 2000s, was beginning to lack “morals, values” (Dragon in *RIZE*). The dancing historical actors contribute their own dance to the arts of Hip-Hop that, in their opinion, has yet to emerge in the commercialized Hip-Hop scene. Clowning and Krump dancers respond to artistic scenarios that have stereotyped their identity and do not speak to their particular experiences as spiritual youth of color.

Dragon explains that Krump is “the only way [they] see fit for storytelling.” Krump, for dancers like Dragon, is a form of storytelling through performance that, I would add, opens up a connection to spiritual griots in the communities on the African continent. In a way, Krumpers act as griots to story-tell, through dance, and with spiritual awareness and political consciousness as part of their performance. Chancy defines storytelling as a means of “undo[ing] the conditions of slavery and colonialism,”<sup>51</sup> two elements still present in HollyWatts, resisted through Krump story telling. The storytelling serves as witness to the oppression and the conditions of slavery and colonialism in the community, and makes room for spiritual empowerment through hip-hop dance.

Afrika Bambaataa, an important figure in the formation and global exportation of hip-hop, defined hip hop as made up of four elements: graffiti writing; b-boy/b-girling; DJing and MCing. The four elements made up a “superforce,” to use Harry Allen’s term, early hip hop critic and hip hop activist. Hip-hop’s participants (graffiti writers, b-boy and b-girls, DJs, MCs) were mostly from Brooklyn and Harlem. However, the West Coast in Los Angeles witnessed a parallel movement. On the U.S. West Coast, the first spoken word records were produced by The Watts poets: Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Etheridge Knight and Nikki Giovanni, who formed part of the Black Arts movement in Los Angeles. Hip-hop dancing also witnessed parallel creations on the opposite coasts. As hip-hop became “new global forms of solidarity” among urban marginalized youths worldwide,<sup>52</sup> in the early 1990s, young adults in HollyWatts were creating new dances—Clowning and Krump (1992).<sup>53</sup> Later, hypercapitalism transformed these essential components of hip hop that made it a folk culture, an ideological revolution, an avant-garde interdisciplinary art form; but Clowning and Krump dancers worked against hypercapitalism. In *Total Chaos*, Michael Chang makes a direct correlation between the birth of hip-hop and Krump dancing, describing Krump as an example that “hypercapitalism hadn’t killed the folk ways.”<sup>54</sup> Clowning and Krump allowed HollyWatts’ young community to connect to the Africana history of performance and Africana forms of spirituality.

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<sup>50</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, “Crossroads, Continuities, and Contradictions: The Afro-Euro-Caribbean Triangle,” in *Caribbean Dance from Abakuá to Zouk: how movement shapes identity*, ed. Susanna Sloat (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2002), 2.

<sup>51</sup> Myriam J.A. Chancy. *Searching for Safe Space: Afro-Caribbean Women Writers in Exile*. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997), 183.

<sup>52</sup> Sujatha Fernandes, *Close to the Edge: In Search of a Global Hip Hop Generation*. (London: Verso, 2011), 20.

<sup>53</sup> The distinction in spelling between AfroReggae the band (in one word) and Afro Reggae the association (in two capitalized words) will be respected throughout the chapters.

<sup>54</sup> Michael Chang, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetic of Hip Hop* (Basic Civitas Book: New York, 2006), xiii.

In the context of 16<sup>th</sup> century forced immigration and bondage, performance, dance and music played a sociopolitical role of survival and rebellion for African men and women.<sup>55</sup> Music and oral traditions already made up the social net in various African nations, where the *griot*, a poet, political figure, story-teller, was a vehicle for a nation or a tribe's history and spiritual healing through music or interactive storytelling. On the slave ship, singing was a way for people to communicate among themselves, to remember their homeland, to prepare rebellious struggles and to connect with their ancestors. Singing was a form of spiritual and physical survival through nostalgia as well as a form of non-threatening communication to strategize for upheaval. Africana performance preserved cultural identity, agency and spirituality in a space of social death and bondage. Krump and Clowning will be seen in this light in the following pages.

In *Africa in Latin America*, Isabel Aretz's book chapter on "Music and Dance in Continental Latin America, with the Exception of Brazil," traces where and how African music is preserved throughout the Spanish and English speaking parts of the continent. Over four hundred years, the cultural influence has been noted from Venezuela to Cuba, from popular music to local rituals.<sup>56</sup> In some cases rituals retain their original imported structure, such as the *lumbalú* ritual of the dead in Cartagena, Columbia, or the cult of the Kromanti jaguar gods in Suriname.<sup>57</sup> In other cases European dances were transformed to create Afro-American dance, such as the contradance that became *danza*, then *danzón*, and *merengue*.<sup>58</sup> In yet other cases new music genres arose in Black settlements or communities of African descent, such as the *tango*, synonymous with *candomble*, a genre of farce music practiced in Uruguay and Buenos Aires in the 1800s.<sup>59</sup>

Off of the slave ship, African forced immigrants preserved music to survive through the pain of living in bondage. In the earliest days of slavery, there were *candomblés*, drum-accompanied dances. In the late 1500s and early 1600s, communities of African descent put together *cofradías* (fellowships), *hermandades* (brotherhoods), *candomblés*, and the most common were *cabildos* (councils or chapters). Performance became associated with resistance and risk of persecution, but also with a power to soothe the ailments of life in bondage through spirituality, and as manifestations of culture mixing. As workers, whether in agriculture, mining, as porters, harvesting tobacco, sugar or cacao, herding cattle with *gauchos* and *llaneros*, music would ail hard or forced labor's wounds, and motivated the animals with whom they worked.<sup>60</sup> Women porters and wet nurses' work songs and lullabies produced transculturated forms of Afro-Latin American music, with Spanish words, verses originating overseas, and others expressing their emotions as

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<sup>55</sup> Jerome Branche, *Colonialism and Race in Luso-Hispanic Literature* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 89.

<sup>56</sup> Isabel Aretz, *Africa in Latin America*, ed. Manuel Moreno Fraginals, trans. Leonor Blum, (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1984).

<sup>57</sup> Isabel Aretz refers to an interview with Batata, the members of the San Bilsio group's chief, in 1956, to explain the ritual. They celebrate death, perceived in their group as the end to all suffering, just as they cry during childbirth since, to them, it marks the beginning of suffering (191).

<sup>58</sup> Aretz, *Africa in Latin America*, 190.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 218.

<sup>60</sup> Aretz, *Africa in Latin America*, 206.

Blacks in the Americas. As they entered and acquired public life, African immigrants and individuals of African descent contributed to folk culture: “as poets, singers, musicians, and dancers. They followed the processions of saints, they danced *cuecas*, *bambucos*, *tamboritors*, and *joropos*.”<sup>61</sup> They had been occupying the streets with dance gatherings since the early 1500s, though such gatherings met restrictions from the colonial authorities, and would keep on expressing themselves through performance in the public space. Krump and Clowning can be seen as 20<sup>th</sup> century iterations of African diasporic street, staged and ritualistic performance, and evolutions of East Coast hip-hop and West Coast 1970s-80s dance.

Krump and Clowning are forms of expression, survival and rebellion at the margins of an oppressive State. The dialogical relationship between a simultaneously oppressive and neglecting State and the marginalized resisting community members in Los Angeles, as well as the chronological relationship between East Coast hip hop and Clowning/Krump, place Clowning and Krump within African diasporic cultural, political, economic and spiritual history.<sup>62</sup>

### **Bodies in Motion: Choreographic Connections to African Diaspora**

Krump/Clown dancing echoes African dance choreography. This section analyzes the Krump/Clowning choreography closely, in an effort to contribute to existing studies on Africana dance. Rather than follow Gottschild’s methodology—referring to dance productions and ritualistic Afro-centered dance rituals—I will focus on describing the characteristics of these street dance groups.

The core of Clown dancing, as Tommy the Clown taught his students, is improvisation. This is what still connects the Krump dancers to the Clown dancers. This is what they have learned from Tommy the Clown, before the Krump dancers decided to start their own aesthetic and part ways from Tommy the Clown’s aesthetic.<sup>63</sup>

The premise of improvisation in dance, according to Dixon Gottschild, goes “hand in hand with the circle.”<sup>64</sup> The structure of the circle, a consistent form of performance and audience participation in the Krump and Clown performances, as well as improvisation, disrupt linearity and the performer-audience divide, and promote authenticity, working

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<sup>61</sup> Aretz, *Africa in Latin America*, 209.

<sup>62</sup> Two texts I will introduce below, João H. Costa Vargas’ comparative studies on Rio de Janeiro and Los Angeles’ precarious conditions and Patricia Rose’s work on the formation of hip hop, from the United States’ East Coast to the West Coast, contextualize musical struggles in violent urban contexts, or spaces that have been left behind by State institutions and laws, which I will further compare to Giorgio Agamben’s “space of exception.”

<sup>63</sup> On improvisation:

There is a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself. For true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. Each true jazz moment (as distinct from the uninspired commercial performance) springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest, each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity: as individual, as member of the collectivity and as link in the chain of tradition. Thus, because jazz finds its very life in an endless improvisation upon traditional materials, the jazzman must lose his identity even as he finds it. (Ralph Ellison 36)

<sup>64</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, “Crossroads, Continuities, and Contradictions: The Afro-Euro-Caribbean Triangle,” 9.

both on the individual level and the collective front.<sup>65</sup> This structure also breaks the biopolitical power that oppresses the members of the HollyWatts community, promoting another flow of energy: “When the circle rules, there is an abundance of energy, vitality, flexibility, and potential.”<sup>66</sup> This is partly how, although they were never meant to survive, the dancers articulate a new way of making life.

Jonathan David Jackson, in his article “Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing,” explains that improvisation should be understood as a characteristic of African American vernacular dancing. He bases his analysis on the principle that “in African-American vernacular dancing improvisation *is* choreography,” which problematizes the way improvisation is perceived in literature.<sup>67</sup> The fact that improvisation *is* choreography in Black vernacular dancing makes African American vernacular dancing place a central value on oral communication as well as sensing.<sup>68</sup> Two aspects are of interest here. On the one hand, oral communication refers to the sense that the “passing on of values, aesthetics, and actual movement traditions [occurs] through experiential knowledge and ritual work.”<sup>69</sup> One example of this oral communication could be the “stripper dance.” As one of the Krump dancers describes it, this new style of dance they recently created, expanded on Clowning with a different improvisation style, the stripper dance is “a flow...it’s a vibe... It’s like a connection.” On the other hand, “sensing” means that the emotions serve as a path to intelligent knowing, that the improvisation choreography requires an “in-the-moment” perception of the self in tune with the environment around the body, as well as the acknowledgment of mystical forces and psychosomatic forces that may be perceived by faith.<sup>70</sup>

With the cultural understanding of improvisation choreography and its relationship to an African diasporic dance practice in contrast to Western dance practices, the newly appropriated and created dance forms take on a new meaning. The aspects of the dance that make improvisation possible, “oral communication” and “sensing,” suggest the ways in which Krump and Clowning can heal the traumatic experiences of the youths’ lives in HollyWatts—through ritual work, with a strong sense of self in-the-moment and a connection to mystical forces. David LaChapelle’s documentary dedicates a long scene to a “Krump session” in the street. In this scene, one of the dancers gets “struck,

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<sup>65</sup> Gottschild, “Crossroads, Continuities, and Contradictions” 9.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Jackson, Jonathan David. “Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing.” *Dance Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (2001), 43.

<sup>68</sup> Improvisation is not a characteristic that only pertains to African American Vernacular dancing, on the contrary, most dances resort to this technique. What the author expresses here is the particularity of improvisation’s role in African American Vernacular Dance.

<sup>69</sup> Jackson, *Dance Research Journal*.

<sup>70</sup> Ritual “work” and “sensing” point to the importance of engaging the spirit through dance, and establish a relationship between healing and religion. The therapeutic function of religious dance is a central component of African dance cultures. For example, it is very similar to the “work” performed by Haitian Vodou performers such as Rara. For more information on the connection between spiritual “work,” engaging with the spirit world at a crossroads between the physical and spiritual realm, and the role of performance in terms of spirituality, community building and healing, see Elizabeth McAlister’s *Rara!: Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its Diaspora* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

something we *all* been waitin' for," presenting one of many instances where the performers show their faith and their connection to mystical forces.<sup>71</sup> Their choreography illustrates both a resistance to an aesthetic of European-derived or Western dance, as well as the aesthetic of hip-hop's commodification and variations of Black vernacular dancing.<sup>72</sup>

The dance techniques of Clowning and Krumping follow other Africana dance techniques that Dixon Gottschild denotes in "Crossroads, Continuities, and Contradictions: The Afro-Euro-Caribbean Triangle." Firstly, Clowning/Krumping choreography uses African dance techniques of polycentrism and polyrhythm. Polycentrism is an Africanist perspective that defends that "movement may originate from any body zone, and two or more areas of the body may simultaneously serve as centers of movement."<sup>73</sup> Polycentrism and polyrhythm make up important tenets of Africana dance. "Africanist-based movement is also polyrhythmic. The feet may maintain one rhythm while torso, legs, arms dance to the beat of different drums. This democracy of body parts is demonstrable in Africanist dance forms throughout the Motherland and across the diaspora."<sup>74</sup> The "democracy of body parts" in Clowning and Krumping is manifested through isolated movements of the shoulders, the rib cage, in a concurrent but separate flow with the feet and legs that move to an independent rhythm below. Both of the movements, the latter being an 'evolution' of the first, also use "high-affect juxtaposition" in their choreography, which are "movement, mood, or attitude disruptions that ensue abruptly, rather than with a transition phase."<sup>75</sup> The dancers go from extremely fast movements to slowed-down movements to violent 'attacks,' and their projected mood changes accordingly, especially in dance-offs, from playful to aggressive.

The dancers' make-up, vibrant colors inspired from clown make-up for the clown dancers, and tribal lines inspired from African tribal masks for Krump dancers, also builds a bridge to the Africanist "aesthetic of the cool," "their faces resembling ancient African masks in stillness, calm, and self-possession, while their bodies dance beyond their quotidian potential...the two illuminate each other in a symbiotic dance that is emblematic of the full spectrum of Africanist aesthetic characteristics."<sup>76</sup>

And the dancers' belief in a connection with a spirit though dance, as well as their occasional "being struck" (a spiritual experience where the dancer falls into a trance, loses control of their body, and faints) connects them to the "continuities between body/mind/spirit" also prevalent in Africanist performance practices."<sup>77</sup>

As asserted by Gottschild:

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<sup>71</sup> In *Borderlands/ La frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa finds that writing also relates to ritual work and a connection with the self and spiritual forces.

<sup>72</sup> Jackson, Jonathan David. "Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing." *Dance Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (2001), 42.

<sup>73</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, "Crossroads, Continuities, and Contradictions: The Afro-Euro-Caribbean Triangle," 6.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>77</sup> Gottschild, "Crossroads, Continuities, and Contradictions" 7.

Another spirit catcher is the torso articulation that is integral to all African-based movement forms. Just as in traditional Africanist religions, where cosmic forces are embodied through similar torso motifs, the articulation of shoulders, rib cage, stomach, pelvis, buttocks, and neck with rolling, undulating, shaking, circling, or rocking motions, combined with syncopated rhythms and movement repetition are known means of calling forth the spirit. There is an undeniable connection between these kinesthetic (muscular and motional) movements and their ability to generate certain affective (emotional and spiritual) states.<sup>78</sup>

The scene of the documentary where one of the dancers is struck, she is performing this very type of choreography, with her whole body engaged in rocking motions, and when the dancer faints, the rest of the dancers who had formed a circle around her conclude that the spirit has taken her, that she has been struck.

In another part of the documentary, Miss Prissy and Dragon explain their reconnection with the church and the spirit. Their choreography in this part of the film is slower, with antithetic movements and elongated gestures. They represent central moves of “catching the spirit:”

[One] way of dancing holds exceptional possibility for spirit catching. . . the dancer, with her spine in a deep, deep arch (so that her back is nearly parallel to the floor—“laid out”—with chest and face open to the ceiling), simultaneously lifts one leg forward and stretches it so far up and out—simultaneously high and away from her body—that the pelvis and standing leg are pulled forward from her center of gravity by the force and direction of the lifted leg. It looks as though she will tumble but she doesn’t, because one or both arms are stretched overhead (meaning parallel to the floor) pulling her in the opposite direction and, thus, creating a seesaw counterbalance. This kind of dramatic movement, a reaching of every part of the body in opposite directions, is a metaphor for human longing, for aspirations beyond our means and desires beyond our condition—paradoxically, body tension implying mind/spirit release.<sup>79</sup>

Miss Prissy’s choreography especially when she bends over, arms in their, flat back, and her leg pulled back, as the organ concludes the song, communicates this longing movement, reaching out beyond her condition as a marginalized subject both in the field of dance as well as socio-politically, as a Black woman living in Hollywatts. The audience’s reaction, and the film direction here also underline her mind/spirit release, taking it to another level as other individuals begin to dance with her. Miss Prissy, a Krump dancer, as she dances in the space of religious praise, embodies the relationship between Krump and the basic praise dance, still “the most prevalent” form of African spirit dance in which “individuals who are inspired by and enthralled in the Holy Spirit simply get up and dance

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<sup>78</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York, NY, Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 260.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

as the spirit moves them.”<sup>80</sup> For a moment, it seems, the room, the image, her body, mind and spirit stop to cherish the moment, and dance the spirit.

Finally, a recurring image is that of Miss Prissy looking up, their gaze going beyond where their body and other dancers’ bodies are around them, physically. This is another component of spiritual dance:

Yet another spirit catcher lies in the gaze. Eyes may look outward, upward, seemingly beyond the physical to the supernatural. Head and chest may follow through, lifted up and open or thrown back. The savvy dancer may luxuriate in these techniques and, like a Method actor, fill them with her subjective subtext for whatever this kinetic challenge may suggest on the affective level.<sup>81</sup>

In every dance routine represented in the film, dancers are caught with this gaze, and their energy spills onto their audience, past their dancing bodies, echoing *Vodun* or *Candomblé* as well as Africanist Pentacostal ritual spaces: “[where the ritual] event is charged by the proceedings so here, too, the stage space—not just the bodies moving in it—is charged by the energy spill taking place.”<sup>82</sup> Miss Prissy’s dancing represents a form of African religious dance, an *embodied knowledge*.

Dixon Gottschild analyzes institutionalized dance forms in ballet, tap dance, and dance productions such as *Revelations* (Ailey, 1960) and *Gate Keepers* (Brown, 2000). The above quote actually comes from a West coast choreographer’s technique, Lester Horton’s technique, but I attempted to apply her analyses and concepts to Krump and Clowning’s “street” technique. Like the established choreographers that Gottschild alludes to, their dances form abstractions rather than narrative, examples of symbolic movement, in which the body dances concepts, symbols, takes on an abstract rather than narrative dance form.<sup>83</sup> In Clowning, the abstraction from a birthday party is placed in the artifice of the dancing body. In Krump, the essence of battle is expressed through a codified war dance. Both follow what Gottschild underlines to be an important component of African dance: “traditional Black dance genres place high value on technique and artifice in the service of expressiveness.”<sup>84</sup> This leads me to argue that Clowning and Krump, in their technique to evoke the spirit and their expressive and symbolic choreography, reformulate traditional Black dance techniques—improvisation; isolation; the circle structure, and embodying the spirit.

Stemming from hip hop culture, Clowning and Krump reject Western forms of art: “to understand or deal with rap music you must be innocent [as in] a commitment to formal Western musical priorities must be abandoned, or at the very least interrogated and revised, especially as they are articulated in the rules of sound production and

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<sup>80</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*, 280.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

reproduction.”<sup>85</sup> They insist that this is their ‘ghetto ballet,’ meaning it is their urban Africanization of a Western aesthetic.

They also put forth a spiritual component in their reformulation of hip hop breakdancing: “It’s not about the thing-in-itself (for Africanist art forms are seldom naturalistic, which is why there is no landscape art of portraiture in traditional genres), but the reinvention of the thing *through* the self, if you will.”<sup>86</sup> What would be the “thing” reinvented by Krump and Clowning, in their case?

Each performance abstracts more than a birthday party or a war dance, in my opinion, they reinvent the state of exception that they live and that has affected their identity *through* their bodies, *through* dance. Dixon Gottschild states that the abstraction is based on the dramatic use of human affect, rather than the suppression of it.<sup>87</sup> If dance is based on the human affect, then it also allows working on the affective level of an individual’s condition. Therefore, I suggest that these dances’ choreographies work against “affective marginalization.” The emotion and expressiveness that the performers put forth present a performative struggle against “affirmative marginalization,” or against the guilt that has been imposed onto them. The performers’ choreographies enable the performers to free their bodies from affective marginalization” and to turn their criminalized bodies into sites of empowerment and agency at the crossroads between the physical and spiritual realms. The thing that is reinvented by Krump and Clowning is the context of the story that the dancers narrate, their lives, their community, their identities. By earning the agency to reinvent, Clowning and Krump performers are able to narrate and share their traumas through dance. They are able to communicate their stories to a wide audience. They make their bodies visible and integral members of a marginalized community. In these respects, they are re-membered in the flesh.

Krump and Clowning are embodied performance movements that engage bodies to reconnect with the spirit, through physical movements, and claim a sociocultural and psychological space to work through personal and collective trauma of racial discrimination and violence, with antecedents clearly found throughout African diasporic history. The beginnings, development and varied definitions of hip-hop can be found in Jeff Chang’s collection of essay, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetics of Hip-Hop*.<sup>88</sup> Nowadays, hip-hop is defined as a philosophy of *doing* rather than writing its manifesto as a cultural movement (Chang x), as a *lived* culture rather than carried over through written discourse.<sup>89</sup> Within hip-hop dance, Clowning and Krump are part of a discourse constantly in motion, an embodied discourse that re-members specific values in the flesh.

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<sup>85</sup> Patricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown CT, Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 83.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*, 261.

<sup>87</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*, 261.

<sup>88</sup> Kool Herc’s DJaying or first public appearance seems to be the ‘beginning’ of the hip hop movement, though it must be noted that graffiti-writing predated it (Chang, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetic of Hip Hop*, 9).

<sup>89</sup> Chang, *Total Chaos: The Art and Aesthetic of Hip Hop*, x.

## Bodies, Memories and Healing: Re-membering in the Flesh

Seeing performance as trauma narratives, in this study, attempts to work through and fill analytical gaps by putting the bodies at the very center of the coping process, as loci of recovery. As each performance narrative proposes to implement therapeutic steps, dancers work through or a community copes with trauma that, in turn, triggers a more comprehensive process of resolution. Clowning and Krump performance promotes self-esteem and agency for/by marginalized young adults of color in Los Angeles. The concept of a “palpable” identity reverberates in re-membering *in the flesh*, with bodily wounds, sensual experiences and performative identities. Bodies are sites of empowerment—through performance (in Afro Reggae, Clowning, and Krump).

The dancers’ performances act as embodied narratives of re-membering—retrieval and re-integration of traumatic memories and afflictions into memory, and remind us of strategies to speak up through body language in the context of oppression. Can these performances serve a therapeutic function in their social context, and if so, what do they ‘heal’? Is it ‘that easy’ to overcome marginalization through performance?

Los Angeles’ Clowning and Krump dancers promote the powers of love and self-esteem. They suggest resolutions through performative re-membering in the flesh—retrieval and re-integration of traumatic memories and afflictions into memory, or re-membering trauma through performance. A traumatic memory is essentially an absent memory. It doubly functions as having a painful impact on the psyche, while at the same time being erased from the psyche in order for the psyche to cope.

In David LaChapelle’s documentary, the testimonies of Krump dancers and Clowning dancers reveal another healing function of dance as it highlights home and belonging. One scene of the documentary particularly focuses on the domestic space, with a song from pop star Cristina Aguilera playing in the background as a group of mothers, Clown dancers, and toddlers, dancing and braiding their hair. This scene aimed to translate the sentiment of home, belonging, and kinship beyond nuclear family bonds that accompanied the Clown and Krump dance movement. This type of community building indicates a growing sense of trust, which in turn has been proven to result in upward mobility. In fact, the performances themselves have allowed many children to find jobs as choreographers, dancers, band members, but also to train future generations to have professional skills such as basic technology, interpersonal communication, etc.

Testimonies from the documentary also show the Krump dancers and Clowning dancers’ sense of communal family structure.<sup>90</sup> One of the dancers’ mothers explains that she uses Tommy the Clown’s authority to give structure to her household; sometimes she threatens her children that they won’t get to go to the next dance competition (“dance-off”), or that

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<sup>90</sup> They become a family, illustrating how “people acquire socially recognized kinship relations with others. Friends may be incorporated into one’s domestic circle: if they satisfy one another’s expectations, they may be called kin—cousins, sisters, brothers, daddies.” (Stack 30) Stack defines “‘family’ as the smallest, organized, durable network of kin and non-kin who interact daily, providing domestic needs of children and assuring their survival” (Stack 31).

she will tell Tommy they misbehaved so he withdraws them from the Clown group. Tommy feels the same way that “clown groups are in a sense like families.” And one of the Krump members, “Tight Eyez” (who now later produced his own videos), mentors a younger member of the group, “Baby Tight Eyez.” Clown and Krump dancers substantiate how dancers create belonging through performance in spaces of exception where the State and the rule of law and safety have been taken away from the community.

The dance performance in HollyWatts empowers the performers as they claim control over their own bodies, and gain freedom through dance. For Krump dancer Miss Prissy, trained in ballet, modern jazz and modern dance, to join the circle of Krump dancers instantly meant to join a space where she could be herself, and be liberated (“it was like, do *you*, and be free.”) In an MTV interview, she admits that at first she thought the Krumpers were like a “motorcycle club,” then learned about Krump dancing’s spiritual component, and felt it to be more liberating than ballet dancing. For Miss Prissy, the opportunity to liberate her self through a dance that embraced a violent rhythm and aesthetic, triggered a “letting go” of her problems, anxieties, and oppression. In *RIZE*, different Clown, Krump, and Stripper—another dance that came out of Clowning and Krump—dancers explain that in their performance, a woman’s sexuality breaks boundaries put onto them in everyday life. A male Stripper performer states:

I’ve seen some parents see little four year olds are out there poppin’ their booties, sayin’ ‘Oh, I would never let my daughter do that.’ Why? She’s out there havin’ fun she’s not doing *anything wrong*, she’s not being sexual, there’s nobody out there with her, there’s nobody touching her, she’s out there poppin’. What’s wrong with poppin’?<sup>91</sup>

Breaking free from binding forms of ballet and modern dance to embrace the aesthetic of improvisation, young girls, adolescent women and mothers turn their exoticized, objectified, and otherwise misrepresented or misread bodies into an artistic source of empowerment, that takes them far from an oppressive “here” to “out there” where they are empowered while “poppin’.”

Miss Prissy embodies the capacity of hip hop dance, reformulated to fit particular experiences and voices, to heal, and create new forms of art, while acquiring agency. Clowning, Krump, and Stripper dance offer us new ways to experience and break down hypercapitalism’s oppression. I will conclude with Miss Prissy’s words, and ask readers, scholars, and dancers, to continue to keep pushing. Because more of our stories have yet to be told, because we need to perform and self-represent “the way we love, and who we are, because there’s no one out there that’s representing that.”

Krump and Clowning are “performance movements” that adapt foundational choreographies and story-telling music to promote African diasporic values of self-esteem, cultural preservation, agency and spiritual resistance as a part of African American identities. Music and dance has played a role in fashioning an identity during

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<sup>91</sup> *RIZE*, Documentary, Lions Gate.

and after the shock of forced immigration from various parts of West Africa to the Americas. Written language served a different purpose for the individuals who had been taken away from their land, lost connections to their family as well as their social role, had little to no access to resources to write or even communicate to others who spoke their language. An intertribal language was born, through song and music. This language allowed for survival, rebellion, and spiritual and cultural rebirth. In the neighborhood of HollyWatts in Los Angeles, this language continues to grow through dance. Krump and Clowning allow a shift from existing as bodies presented as sites of threat and extinction to sources of spiritual empowerment. Clowning and Krump dancers—their subjectivity *and* their dancing bodies—negotiate survival from trauma and socioeconomic marginalization. Their performances act as embodied narratives of “re-membering in the flesh.” They enact contemporary iterations of spiritual retrieval and re-integration of traumatic memories and afflictions into memory through the body and enact self-worth, self-defined sexuality, and agency for and by marginalized children and young adults.

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Nankama African Dance Conference  
Howard University  
Department of Theatre and Dance  
Washington, DC

February 9-10, 2019  
Conference Proceedings

**Theme: Dancing Identity**

Identity has historically been an elusive phenomenon to define. It is both static and dynamic, and is constructed, deconstructed, preserved and appropriated, by individuals, groups, and nations. Elusiveness notwithstanding, Africana dance displays and defines identity in ways that words cannot. The conference theme, “Dancing Identity” seeks to foster critical analysis and rigorous discourse regarding identity and the performance of dance in Africa and the African Diaspora.

**Abstracts**

**Session 1: Pedagogical Conversations on Africana Dance**

*“Using African Dance As a Tool for Deepening Identity Exploration”*

Truth Hunter, Connecticut College

Shani Collins-Achille, Connecticut College

This paper examines the impact that an interdisciplinary course had on the identity development of a multicultural group of students studying West African dance at a small liberal arts college in the Northeast. Dancers were funded by the college to travel to Senegal in order to engage in a deep exploration of the historical landmark called the House of Slaves. This historical location was a holding place where Africans were kept in bondage before enduring the horrors of the middle passage. The chief question that this course explored was, “What does it mean to be a witness to this historical experience?” The House of Slaves brought up complex and difficult emotions for the dancers, and for that reason, they were tasked with the challenge of transforming their experience into original choreography grounded in African rooted dance. April of 2018 dancers performed their work for the college community called *A(cross) the Water*. Through dance, they told a powerful story of African peoples’ journey from bondage to liberation. Dancers wrote final reflection papers that allowed the instructors of the course to glean significant themes on race, identity development, heritage, and belonging. Their reflections demonstrated that dance, travel, and history can serve as powerful learning tools for students of diverse backgrounds to make meaning out of their identities.

*“The Internet and Africana Dance, Curse or Blessing?’: Is the African Dance We See on the Internet African Dance?”*

Phylise Smith, Scripps College

This paper explores how “African dance” in all of its definitions\* is presented on the Internet and in Social Media. For example, what does one find when doing a Google search of “African” dance, of “West African” dance, or definitions of “African” dance? How is “African” dance presented and defined on YouTube? Who are the people posting videos and information online about “African” dance? What are their goals? How does what constitutes “African” dance online promote and or distort concepts of the true definitions of “African” dance? What are the images of “African” dance on Instagram? What is discussed about “African” dance on Twitter, and Facebook? Are these the same presentations that we see on YouTube, Google and other places on the Internet? Why or why not? These questions and implications for what is shown as “African” dance on the Internet will be explored and discussed in this paper with possible conclusions and suggestions for how dances of the “African” diaspora can best be presented.

\*Definitions of “African” Dance will be defined in the paper’s introduction.

*“Identity in African Dance: Myth and Reality”*

Judith Lynne Hanna, University of Maryland

As often viewed, the name “African Dance” overlooks the multiplicity of identities in Africa. Linguists estimate 1250-2100 different language groups, and there are most likely as many different dance patterns. Among a language/dance group, patterns are commonly divided by participation criteria, e.g., age, gender, birthplace, birthplace of spouse; accomplishment; costume; accompaniment; style, structure, and symbolism. Evidence comes from my 1963 field work in Nigeria, Uganda, and Kenya\* subsequent visits to Kenya and Ethiopia, borrowed film from 14 countries and more than 100 ethnic groups from a German ethnographic archive, and review of the literature on African dances to date.

A study of Nigeria’s Ubakaka Igbo illustrates multiple identities. Gender is one example: When the social and biological roles of men and women are supposed to differ--women as life-giving mothers, and men as life-taking warriors--the dances of each gender contrast. Women dance slowly and effortlessly in circles, whereas men dance rapidly and forcefully in angular lines.

The myth of “African dance” comes from media reports, outdated history, and Western and African teachers learning a dance or a few dances apart from the social/cultural/historical context and generalizing to all dance. The codification of some dances by instructors, companies, cultural centers, and universities, as well as inadequate research methods to study dance, also lead to misconceptions.

The power of dance is rooted in the brain, and how we learn who am I, who should I be and how (attitudes, acts, and emotion) come from the images we see. Dance constructs, reinforces and deconstructs or questions traditional and changing identity.

*“Fare Ra Lankhi: the Circle is an Indigenous Pedagogical Space for West African Dance”*  
Ojeya Banks, Denison University

Somatic memoirs from the author's participation at dance intensives with acclaimed dancer-choreographer Moustapha Bangoura in the West African Republic of Guinea reveal how solo dance experiences can test acoustic literacy, promote music interaction, and foster an aptitude for movement invention. These skills are fundamental to West African dance and are learned in the *fare ra lank hi* (dance circle). This dance ethnography explores the pedagogical attributes of the circle and strives to provide dance educators an enhanced awareness of indigenous approaches to dance education inherent across the region. Distinct West African objectives of dance, musicality, improvisation, dance education, and choreographic practice are discussed.

## **Session 2: Home is Where the Dance Is: Constructing Africa in the Diaspora**

*“African Dance in Diasporic Experience: The Congos and Venezuela”*

Mesi Walton, Howard University

Rehema Nkisi, Global ReConnections & Zongo Heling Dance

This paper and presentation will delve into the historical connections of Venezuelan and the Kongo kingdom as well as the direct connection to dance. We will demonstrate AfroVenezuelan dance styles along with their possible predecessors from the post-colonial states of the Congo. Scholars such as Joseph Holloway have investigated Congo dances that have been performed throughout the U.S. such as the ring shout, the Calinda, the Juba; there is Capoeira and Samba in Brazil, and in other parts of the Americas. Yet, the discussion is limited on the African retentions in Afro-Venezuelan dance culture. This discussion and demonstration aims to highlight historical facts and cultural memory to delve into Congolese cultural traditions in the African Diaspora. Mesi Walton, a doctoral candidate in the Department of World Studies at Howard University and Rehema Nkisi, a renowned African Dancer of over 40 years and, cultural griot/historian, will discuss and demonstrate this rich continuum which has often utilized dance as a viable means of expressing roots from one continent to another.

*“Bamboula! African Diasporic Dances of the Caribbean”*

Militeri Tucker, Bombazo Dance Company

Reading the term “African Diaspora,” one immediately thinks of the different dance styles and traditional drumming patterns from the African continent. I define “diaspora” as a group of people who have migrated and/or were forcefully removed from their native lands resettling and preserving their culture in their new environment. Culture preservation in these environments have presented its challenges were adaptation in dance form, drumming patterns, instrumentation and language took place, thus evolving or creating a new form of movement, instruments and drum styles. As a vivid Afro-Caribbean dancer and independent scholar, the term “diaspora” not only represents the diversity within the African continent and its preservation outside of Africa; but it also represents all the dance forms and drumming styles that have emerged from the amalgamation of traditional African rhythms found in the Caribbean, Central and South America where African identity is very much present. This paper and the focus on the presentation will be on the connection of traditional African dance and drums patterns to the Caribbean island of Puerto

Rico, and to the Central/South American Garifuna culture. For example, Bomba is the Puerto Rican genre consisting of song, drum, and dance with a strong African ancestry in the Island. Dating back to the seventeenth century of the enslaved Africans brought to the land, it was a dance of liberation that has been kept and passed down by key Bomba Spanish and Creole families throughout generations. Bomba has a distinct form of dance, drum patterns and instrumentation that was influenced by the adaptation of the enslaved of the Island and with the surviving Taino-Arawaks habitants. The genre also has distinctive similarities with the French and Spanish Caribbean islands, Garifuna culture and with the Southern state of the United States: New Orleans, Louisiana. The presentation will have a basic approach to the history, dance form, rhythms, drumming patterns and songs of both Bomba and “Chomba” Garifuna. This paper follows the transatlantic slave trade and incorporates the acknowledgement and heavy influence of the Taino-Arawak cultures contributing to these Afro Caribbean/ Central American genres. Finally it answers how are these dances considered African?, How are the descents identifying? and can it be traced back to the African nation and or tribe?

*“To PerforMemory an Afro-European Identity: Memory and Movement in the African Diaspora”*

Layla Zami, Pratt Institute

Oxana Chi, Oxana Chi & Ensemble Xinren

How do AfroEuropeans use the body to perform identities, memories and trajectories that challenge the stiff linearity of Western geohistorical constructs? This presentation explores dance as a dynamic embodied archive for the retelling of stories that challenge dominant historical narratives. With Black bodies' history of attempted erasure, their mere bodily presence on stage is already subversive and enacts resistance to hegemonic Western timespaces. This moves our quest to question the moving body as a counterhegemonic site, medium and subject of knowledge from an Afrocentric perspective.

The case study moves along lines of meaning in the work of Nigerian-German dancer-choreographer Oxana Chi. Exploring her recent repertoire, we ask how it reimagines Afro-European identity in relation to African diasporic epistemologies and other non-Western temporalities. In a transdisciplinary perspective, the paper offers insights into Layla Zami's own concept of PerforMemory (2018) and also draws from such various sources as Kariamuwelsh Asante's “seven senses” of African dance (2001), Michelle Wright's *Physics of Blackness* (2015), and Nadine George-Graves's “diasporic spidering” (2014). The contribution asks how dance can help us to represent the past, re-frame the present and re-imagine the future. In an innovative and truly Afrocentric format, the empowering paper involves an inspiring live dancemusic input that can also be framed within a workshop.

### **Session 3: Claiming Space: African Dance Retentions in Popular Culture**

*“Eat Me: Consuming Black Gendered Posteriors Through Popular Culture Dance”*

Samantha Salters, George Mason University

In 2013, popular culture artist Miley Cyrus was recognized for sparking a twerking epidemic on the social media circuit after an unexpected performance at MTV's Video Music Awards. For

many young American women, that meant they were free to shake their “buns” freely without consequence. However, for the Black female body, it was another act of invisibilizing a history of traditional dance cultures and stereotypes of promiscuity. “Eat me” examines the Black female posterior as a site of communal sustenance in American popular culture phenomena such as, “twerking”. Inspired by Patricia Hill Collins’ theory of “primitive sexuality” and bell hooks’ idea that the hypersexualization of historical enslaved and contemporary Black bodies in American popular culture are paralleled, “Eat me” addresses the consumption of traditional African expressions of Black sexuality, as decontextualized material for contemporary dance crazes. More specifically, “iconic black bodies” in performance, like Beyonce’ and Nicki Minaj, are investigated through a lens of traditional African dance traditions, impacted by historical stereotypes of the “hottentot Venus” and the “jezebel”.

*“Makolongulu: Ndombolo, the Ghetto Kids Emergence of Afrobeats in the DMV”*

Giltrecia Head, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University

Amber Golden, Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University

There’s a growing popularity of Afrobeat genre and dances that are becoming more present in American social dance arenas. We are analyzing the dance Ndombolo and dance group “the ghetto kids” and how these social movements have become threaded into popular East Coast culture with an analysis of language present in these dance forms that impacts social dynamics in American society.

There are many artists gaining mainstream attention, but more prominently are those from Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Congo, Cote D’Ivoire and Ethiopia. In the Washington DC, Maryland and Virginia area known as the DMV, we have seen a growing nuance of African based movement performed to secular social music of the African Diaspora. The DMV is an urban triad that shares various cultural trends socially and politically. The cultural influences in a region bearing the Nation’s capital are contributed to the Americanization of social movements.

Within the last decade, there has been growing attention on “the ghetto kids” from Uganda. Their appearance on YouTube with Afrobeat artist Eddy Kenzo has now made them global celebrities and even more recently, in Childish Gambino’s “This is America” performing the “Gwaragwara”. This presentation is intended to provide a glimpse into Afrobeat popularity in the DMV, the contextual influences that are identified with Afrobeats and how they impact social change as well as the projected outcomes of this genre in relation to community and performance awareness.

*“Hip Hop, the Language of Africana Activism Vernacular: Celebrations of a People”*

Patricia Dye, Teachers College Columbia University

Hanan Hameen, Walden University

Over generations, Hip Hop popularity increased while African dance grew more diverse; the lack of scholarly research for both present gaps in literature that need filling. This diversity has expanded to include dances of the diaspora including Hip Hop as cultural movement, as well as Afrobeat (West Africa), Pantsula (South Africa), and Afro-Caribbean movement. As indigenous forms of culturally artistic expression, the misrepresentation of Hip Hop, with South Bronx origins, and African dance has resulted in the fragmentation of a people connected through historic cultural

ties from Africa. A natural process exists that is innate to people of the African diaspora, where characteristics are instinctive, with or without knowing individual cultural roots. If discussion on diasporic movement through theoretical perspectives is centered around common roots in African dance, Hip Hop dance as cultural movement juxtaposed with traditions of the Caribbean transform into a language of Africana Activism. With open dialogue and collaboration on who the people of the African diaspora are and what is known, Hip Hop as a culture compared with traditions of the Caribbean can lead to a unified acceptance of the common roots in African dance and culture. Knowing and learning the historical roots of the arts as a weapon of social justice, gives us a richer frame of reference from which to analyze Hip Hop, Language, and Africana Activism as diverse and immersed manifestations throughout the African diaspora.

“I am because you are!” “Each one teach one!” ~ Mantras of Dr. Baba Charles “Chuck” Davis

#### **4. Screendance Session**

*Original Spaces: Black/African/Pacific Dance Intersections*

Ojeya Banks, Denison University

The short dance film *Original Spaces* capturing Black African and Pacific diasporic movement artists- Ojeya Cruz Banks and Lela Aisha Jones dancing on the shores of Te Waipounamu (South Island), Aotearoa/New Zealand will be screened. Dancers are robed in mud cloth, or *bogolanfini* from West Africa, the film inherently references a juxtaposition of land and culture through location, dress, music, and moves. The collaboration with Cruz Banks, Jones, Alex B. Shaw, and Aidan Un was inspired by experiences in the South Pacific and engagement with Pasifika worldview of land and dance (Royal 2007, 2010, 2014; Salmond 2014; Potiki Bryant 2014; Cruz Banks 2010; 2014; 2015; 2017) and ruminations about the historical and social experiences of Black/African/Pacific people and their troubled/colonized relationships to the earth. The visual story aspires to invigorate contemporary Black and indigenous shared dialogues about identity and land. Relocating African diasporic dance has helped to process the continuum of embodying, reconceptualizing, and reapplying dance traditions. Restoring notions of Black/African/Pacific diasporic people and their relationship with the natural environment is sacred work of decolonization and an activation of Black Pacific joy.

# Nankama African Dance Conference

February 9-10, 2019

Howard University, Washington DC.

## **PROCEEDINGS**

*“Identity in African Dance: Myth and Reality”*

**Judith Lynne Hanna, University of Maryland**

Paper prepared for The Nankama African Dance Conference,

Howard University, February 9, 2019

### Identity in African Dance—Myth and Reality

Judith Lynne Hanna, Ph.D.

#### Abstract:

As often viewed, the name “African Dance” overlooks the multiplicity of identities in Africa. Linguists estimate 1250-2100 different language groups, and there are most likely as many different dance patterns. Among a language/dance group, patterns are commonly divided by participation criteria, e.g., age, gender, birthplace, birthplace of spouse; accomplishment; costume; accompaniment; style, structure, and symbolism. Evidence comes from my 1963 field work in Nigeria, Uganda, and Kenya, subsequent visits to Kenya and Ethiopia, film from an ethnographic archive, and review of the literature on African dances and neuroscience to date.

In this article I will discuss the misrepresentation of African dances; sources; a conceptualization of dance, Africa, and identity (kinds of identity; tradition and change). Focus will be on deconstructing “African dance” as a misleading concept and the methods that constitute its coinage. My comments are relevant to explanations of dance performances, program notes, and research. I draw upon evidence from my 1963 field work in Nigeria, Uganda, and Kenya, subsequent visits to Kenya and Ethiopia, film of more than 100 ethnic groups in 14 countries from the Institute für den Wissenschaftlichen Film Göttingen ethnographic archive in Germany, and review of the literature on African dances and neuroscience to date.

The myths of “African dance” come from media reports, outdated history (Gore 2001), Western and African teachers learning the movements of a dance or a few dances apart from the meaning/social/cultural/historical/philosophical context, private studios, schools, universities, and dance companies generalizing to all dance in Africa. The codification of some dances by instructors, companies, cultural centers, and universities, as well as inadequate research methods to study dance, also lead to misconceptions. Dance is more than movement. Mabingo (2015, 2017) points out that through their own pedagogies<sup>1</sup> integral to their dance practices, people learn dances in their villages. Dance is tangential to academic schools.

We need to specify what we mean by dance, Africa, and identity. **Dance** has many meanings. Some groups do not have a name for what we consider dance. “Nkwa” among the

Ubakala Igbo in Nigeria is used for dance, play, and drum. The word for dance among some groups may include gambling, games, storytelling, music, and singing.

A cross-cultural conceptualization of dance allows us to have a consistent meaning: dance is purposeful; uses intentional rhythm; has cultural influences; uses nonverbal body movement in time, space and effort; communicates through locomotion, gesture, posture, stillness, the senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, kinesthesia), music and costume; and has standards for each genre (Hanna 1979/1987 elaborates on what is dance, how it contrasts with animal behavior, and how it is like verbal language).

Note that dance in the West was thought to be fun, high art, emotional -- anti-intellectual -- not involving the mind. There are sayings such as “dancer never a scholar” (Karsinova 1925). The Western cultural heritage from biblical and early Greek times divides the mind and body, the body supposedly undermining the mind. Within the Protestant ethic, dance like play, was permitted only to children. Adult dancing was considered the devil’s handiwork and is still suspect among some people today (Wagner 1997). But neuroscientists’ study of dancers’ brains revealed some surprises about the cognitive parts of the brain active in dance (Hanna 2015 discusses recent research). The academic study of dance is late compared to the study of music and visual art. Until Nureyev’s six digit income and hip hop’s odyssey from street to stage, boys were often told dance is for sissies. Some black parents did not want their children to study dance and perpetuate the stereotype that physical activity is all blacks can do.

In discussions of African dance, **Africa** is usually referred to as part of the continent beneath the Sahara, but some African countries in this region have Arab populations with their own dances. Linguists report there are between **1250 and 2100 different language groups** in Africa (Heine and Nurse 2000), and it is most likely there are **as many different dance groups**. And groups themselves have subgroups divided by participation criteria (occasion, age, gender, birthplace, spouse’s birthplace, and accomplishment), movement style, structure and symbolism, music, and costume.

“African dance” is a Eurocentric construction (Gore 2001). As often viewed, the name “African dance” evokes homogeneity and overlooks the multiplicity of identities on a diverse continent. An illustration is from Kenya’s 1963 celebration of independence from Great Britain. The Union Jack was lowered and the Kenyan flag raised in a grand stadium where Kenyans groups from throughout the country performed. (See film, YouTube.com, jlhanna36, Kenya Celebrates Independence.)

**Identity** is a social category defined by characteristic attributes or behaviors that define who one is. This identity is usually recognized by the self and others. However, an identity may be also attributed to a person or group. Dance, a marker and symbol of identity, is powerful in creating, reinforce, and changing identity. How we learn who we are, who we should be and how (attitudes, acts, and emotion) are rooted in the brain, the images we see, and learning pedagogy. The brain interprets the images in terms of knowledge a person has and implants this in the memory storage parts of the brain according to neuroscience (Hanna 2015). Dance constructs, reinforces and deconstructs or questions traditional and changing identity.

People have multiple identities that can be expressed in the same or in different dances. There may be a difference between dancers' expressions of identity and audience perceptions. Continuity and change can occur over time and simultaneously.

During pre-colonial and colonial times, Westerners' perception of the identity of "African dance" was negative. Dance was associated with pagan religion. Christianity rejected things carnal, and the introduction of Christianity destroyed the *raison d'être* of much dance in Africa. Part of indigenous belief systems, dances were banned at missionary schools. At Michigan State University in 1964, I had to teach Africans how to perform an African dance for an ethnic dance festival because they had not been able to learn their own dances at their homes.

Europeans passed secular moral judgments: Within the Victorian frame of morality, African dancing was branded as licentious, bestial display. Few Europeans realized, for example, that dances involving much pelvic movement could among other things be a glorification of fertility related to the desire for abundant harvests, a paradigm of life force, and an affirmation of life itself. Gauged against Western theater art ballet, African dances were considered primitive and exotic.

With independence, "African dance" identity became positive. Many African groups asserted their national and other identities through dance. Occasions to assert identity include religious; secular; traditional, rural, folk and communal; theatrical, commercial, and tourist; work (agricultural, pastoral, western profession).

Through movement nuance, I have spotted identities of dancers whom I had never seen before. When I saw the Uganda dance company in Montreal, Canada, all in costume, two dancers looked different from others who were essentially villagers. One unique dancer was a British trained actor and the other was a sociologist. In Nigeria, Igbo and Yoruba groups were

doing the same popular highlife social dance but were distinguishable by different energy levels. The former was energetic, the latter calmer.

Methodology is critical in research, and generalizations (found in much literature on African dance)<sup>2</sup> are not valid without informants that represent a group. A representative sample, focus on similar kind of dance, use of the same questions, and consideration of textual factors and alternative variables are important. Men and women usually have different dances, but among the Ubakala, old people can join any dance. Among a single people we have reports of a chief responding to a dance in terms of it indicating political support.

I mentioned that some research studies with inadequate methodology contributed to misconceptions about dance in Africa. I will point out two reports that have had wide recognition in the academic world, and their incorrect material has been applied to falsely generalize about dance in Africa.” Alan Lomax, in *Choreometrics*, stated that African dance is wild hip-swinging movement (Lomax 1968:224). But he had a “cherry picked” skewed sample, a single dance from only six different cultures (out of 1000s). He used various kinds of film (e.g., ethnographic and commercial) prepared for different purposes and times. Authentication is flawed. As a consultant to *Choreometrics*, Lomax and I viewed my Ubakala Igbo dance film from Nigeria. Yet, he ignored the mothers’ and grandmothers’ slow, fluid movements and described only young peoples’ dances. He also focused on identity by work movement style, arguing “that danced movement is patterned reinforcement of the habitual movement patterns of each culture and culture area” (Lomax 1968: xv). Although there are some work dances in African cultures, in most cases dance movement is deliberately different from work movement in order to make dance become super ordinary.

Robert Farris Thompson, art historian at Yale, wrote *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act*, published by the respectable University of California Press. Thompson may have been the first to exhibit African art, not hanging on a wall but in action, for example, videos of masks on dancing figures. African dance he claimed to be identified by an African aesthetic. Thompson is highly respected and scholars assumed the veracity of his writing on this topic. Indeed, his 10 aesthetic canons have been accepted as valid and used by dance scholars, e.g., Kerr-Berry (1994), Dixon Gottschild (1996), Wills (1996), Osumare (2007), and Emily Willette (2012). However, Mabingo (2015:133) refers to Thompson’s and others’ work as “replete with indecipherable ethnocentric interpretations.” (See Hanna 2003 on aesthetics.)

Some canons did not ring true to my familiarity with African dances. Statements of canons should be supported by evidence, valid and reliable. Thompson said the canons were based on the appended interviews. So I examined his “evidence,” what his informants told him-- 25 pages of 96 interviews collected over nine years from ten cultures of the Guinea coast.

Alas the evidence/data/interviews do not support his canons. The highest support for any of Thompson’s ten canons is “ancestorism,” about 20% of the 96 informants support this. Moreover his methodology was faulty, not compatible with accepted research methods. The informants responded to a videotape of difference dances, sometimes of their own group, sometimes of a neighboring or a foreign one. At times the informants responded to the author himself trying to emulate local dance sequences. Respondents were asked different questions. There is also a gender and expertise bias. Almost all Thompson’s respondents were male and between 20-60 years. We do not know if the respondents were considered to be experts by their own people. Thompson even cites individuals without substantial knowledge of, or interest in, Africa, or dance, in support of his asserted canon, e.g. Plato.

A comment on a couple of canons. “Ephibism,” youthfulness--excludes pregnant and old women often unable to dance with strength and speed. His “get down quality” doesn’t apply to male pastoralists who jump in an upright posture. “Dancing many drums” is another canon that does not describe all African dances. Some groups may not use drums.

A study of Nigeria’s Ubakaka Igbo illustrates multiple identities with their different aesthetics (Hanna 1988). Who participates in a dance and when, movement, costume, and accompaniment are identity markers. Gender is one example: When the social and biological roles of men and women are supposed to differ--women as life-giving mothers, and men as life-taking warriors--the dances of each gender contrast. Women dance slowly and effortlessly in circles, whereas men dance rapidly and forcefully in angular lines. The Nkwa Edere, Ubakala young girls’ dance in villages shows the identity of youthful creativity and continuity and change. There are varying levels, directions, and complexity with a four count conga style step. Change is manifest in the introduction of heterosexual ballroom style couple dancing. Public heterosexual touch between males and females is not traditionally approved. So the girls between ages 11 and 18 make the strange familiar as they mime a male-female couple dance encountered in urban areas. They pair, embrace, and caress each other touching the neck, shoulders, waist, back, buttocks, and hips. The girls parody the waltz as they prepare everyone for the fact that

many girls move to urban areas and universities and assume a modern identity by engaging in public male-female couple dances.

The problem of irrelevant theory and lack of evidence also appears in Banks' work on education (2010). She tries to examine how African dance of the diaspora in various postcolonial contexts is involved in healing from cultural oppression. She reports on students, mostly Latino, who are taught the Soli dance common in Guinea. But she provides no evidence of the students' identifying as oppressed and learning a dance that leads them to feel healed.

In this paper I have addressed myths and realities and their sources in addition to what are dance, Africa, and identity. Generalizations about African dances are difficult because there are multiple groups that have multiple identities. I have presented some examples of inaccurate portrayals of African dances and pointed out the importance of methodology in conducting research. Below are illustrative ethnographies about individual groups in Africa. Knowledge about African identities manifest through dance can be advanced by research using the appropriate methodology, movement analysis facilitated by doing the dance, focus on a dance or a group's dances, categories of identity, production, performance meaning, and impact. Seeing dance as text and analysis of text and context provides understanding.

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1 Mabingo (2015:132) refers to sequences and protocols of learning such as cross-generational, collective and participatory teaching and learning, which are founded on communal-based performances ... responsible for transference of dance knowledge, skills, and competencies from one individual or group of individuals to another."

2 Welsh 1996; Welsh 2004 recognizes diversity but then says, "All African dances can be used for transcendence and transformation purposes" (2004:18) without any evidence. Hubbard and Sofras (1998:78) speak of "African dance movement" without specification.

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# Nankama African Dance Conference

February 9-10, 2019

Howard University, Washington DC.

## **PROCEEDINGS**

*“Using African Dance As a Tool for Deepening Identity Exploration”*

Truth Hunter, Connecticut College

Shani Collins-Achille, Connecticut College

Shani Collins-Achille, Chair of the Dance Department  
Truth Hunter, Director of Race and Ethnicity Programs  
Connecticut College

## Using African Dance as a Tool for Deepening Identity Exploration

“I have never felt so free and empowered about being a part of a creative process that could potentially change the way in which people view the history of those who are oppressed” -Jenaya, Student Participant

### Overview

This essay is a reflection on the experience that we had as instructors at Connecticut College with designing and implementing an interdisciplinary course that included dance, research, travel, and performance. More specifically, we are intrigued by the impact that this course had on the identity development of our student dancers. Through our own reflection as instructors and by closely examining the themes that emerged from our students’ final reflection papers, we are interested in finding out how can African dance serve as a tool for deepening identity exploration. As we reflect on the process of teaching this course, we plan to apply this knowledge to the next course we will develop that will engage students in a holistic process of deep interdisciplinary learning. The goal of our class was to explore how West African dance can be a powerful pathway for understanding the culture of marginalized peoples, challenging stereotypes about African peoples, and using movement as a healing modality. This class was profoundly interdisciplinary, as we engaged students in full body and holistic means of learning.

### Course Design

The inspiration for designing this course stems from Yaa Gyasi’s novel, *Homegoing*. This novel was the common reading assigned to the Connecticut College Community during the 2017-2018 academic year. Gyasi’s work looks closely at the slave castle in Ghana as a critical component of the Transatlantic Slave Trade system. We were moved by Gyasi’s attention to this historical experience, and we too, decided that it would be our focal point for deep learning and the impetus for our final culminating dance performance. After conceptualizing this course, we were awarded a grant to fund all six of our students to attend a 8-day trip to Senegal for a hands-on experience with exploring the House of Slaves. This historical location was a holding place where Africans were kept in bondage before enduring the horrors of the middle passage.

Gyasi’s *Homegoing* became essential in establishing and deepening our personal/global connections with pre-existing relationships such as family ties and the historic and cultural abrasiveness of the relationships of oppressive leaders (i.e. slave catchers, slave traders, and slave masters) during the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In addition to Gyasi’s *Homegoing*, we delved into other seminal texts such as *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, which provided us with a robust analysis on how colonialism and capitalism played a tremendous role in the creation of profound levels of poverty and inequality in many parts of Africa. Also, we explored Brenda Dixon Gottchild’s *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance Dance and Other Contexts* examines foundational aesthetics and cultural implications of West African dance. The combination of these texts allowed students to translate the historical trauma of enslavement, and their own lived experiences prior to and after visiting Senegal, into movement that

embodied agency, joy, and liberation. The end product of this deep engagement was demonstrated in our dance piece, *A(cross) the Water...*

### **Traveling and Dancing in Senegal**

Students earned a position in this class by auditioning in an open West African dance studio class, by performing a solo of their choice, and submitting a short paper that examined why they want to travel, perform, and train in dance in Senegal. Students were asked to write about how this connects with their current studies and future trajectory of their academic work. While in Senegal, the group trained and performed in contemporary and West African dance at the Ecole Des Sables and with Bakalama Dance Company in Dakar at the Blaise Senghor Cultural Center. Our dance classes in Senegal engaged us with several local artists and musicians while training intensely in West African dance technique, rehearsing tediously, and performing twice. Our trip allowed us to expand our movement vocabulary in addition to setting and deepening our personal connection to the conceptual framework for the piece that we created for the class, which examined systems (past and present) of oppression.

Traveling, training, and viewing performances in Senegal was extremely helpful in understanding the foundations and contributions of West African dance forms both in its cultural contexts and in the ways in which it functions in Senegalese society. The historical and cultural contexts of the dances we learned were explained and demonstrated by master teachers. In addition to strength and core building exercises, we practiced particular Senegalese techniques such as Sabar and Wala Sadon (a dance of the slaves). Through repetition and practice, we demonstrated our knowledge of West African dance to our Senegalese master teachers, Khady Malal Badji, Alicia Sebia Gomis, and Babacar Top, as they inspired us to take on the intricacies of the Sabar style. Students learned close to a dozen distinct West African dances during our in class time plus during the trip to Senegal. Some of the content from our classes in Senegal in addition to students' choreography, based on their embodied experience at The House of Slaves on Goree Island, was integrated into sections of our final dance, *A(cross) the Water...*

### **Choreo(graph)ic Process and Performance**

From the beginning of the course, students trained in the technique of West African dance. In preparation for traveling to Senegal we had to support our students with developing a deeper level of professionalism in order to train with Bakalama Dance Company and Babacar Top's Groupe. Our students represent different cultural backgrounds and all varied in dance experience. Many students had studied hop hop, modern/ post-modern, Afro-Caribbean dance, and improvisation studio time acclimated the group while it made distinctions in each student's physical strengths and weaknesses. We worked collectively when weaknesses and insecurities surfaced. Given the demands of performance, our group agreements reminded us all to lean into the process, which was at times was very challenging, especially as we transitioned into performance mode in Senegal and at Connecticut College in the second part of our course.

In addition to training in West African Dance, students first learned a repertory piece from SNIC/Eternal Works DANCE entitled, *Lullen In a New Plantation Economy*, choreographed by Shani Collins to the music of Chopin and The Master Musicians of Tanzania. This work explored some of the intricate relationships of oppression and cultural coexistence, trickery, and violent cycles. As it related mostly to

black and white life during the Antebellum period in the United States. This work allowed for students to begin to access clarity within physical emotionality and a multilingual vocabulary that we were investigating in our body language. Using dance to investigate deep wombs of the enslaved and the attitudes of enslavers, this process extended itself beyond bodily emotions into spiritual and psychological spaces. Both works illuminated, black male figures. In *Lullen In a New Plantation Economy*, a young man of African decent runs in place, at different paces to the sound of a metronome in one spot until the dance is over.

In *A(cross) the Water...*, the piece opens in an African village scene where three men of African descent are gathered, escorting two women, one seated on the shoulders of a man as they all walk downstage through a path of light. The men kneel circling the women wrapped in traditional cloth. The women dance, playing on the steps of Wala Sadon/Krumping, mixed sensual women's dances that are representative of Mother Africa, Black royalty, and African civilizations that existed before colonization. After a short black out, the tone shifts abruptly and we see a young man standing center-center. He has dark skin and he is wearing a black hoodie with an African print patch on his back shaped in a circle. Walking towards us we hear the text and voice of Oscar Brown Jr., "Bid em in."

The dancers wore black hoodies and black pants that revealed their skin through slits on the sides. We asked the dancers to choose a sacred spot on their bodies to sew a patch of the Senegalese cloth that we brought back from Toubab Dialaw. In the studio, we transposed historical pictures and accounts of bodies traveling on boats across the water onto our bodies. We practiced embodying photographs of this horrific experience to create movement vocabulary. We created space for students to react to being piled on top of each other as cargo. We imagined black bodies that were malnourished, debilitated by the heat, torn apart by broken family ties. Students studied the movements of Ebo and Nago, Haitian warrior dances and we integrated this aspect of resistance in our work. As the dance transitioned to its final phase of the prayer circle, dancers used improvisation and made choices within the choreographic structure. Our musicians supported us in constructing the sound score, experimenting with different rhythms that would enhance the narrative of this piece. Musicians would riff off each others' rhythms while using the Djembe, Djun Djun, Samban, and the traditional drum sets. As men of African decent, the musicians intentionally played dual roles. We integrated them into the storyline of the choreography so that we could further punctuate and symbolize their lived experiences and dramatic shifts throughout history.

### **Identity Exploration**

While designing this course, our main objective was for our students to be socially responsible performing artists. We wanted them to complete this course knowing that they could produce public performances that educate the Connecticut College community on narratives and social issues of historically marginalized groups. Our students demonstrated that they accomplished this goal but they were also able to take away something else from this course that was deeply personal and moving for their own development and growth. Through close analysis of their final essays, we were able to identify recurring themes that reflect holistic transformation. Please note that each student had given us written permission to share their reflection in this paper.

### **Theme 1: A Deeper Awareness of Positionality and Social Privilege**

“We had to examine ourselves and be honest with our own bias/baggage that we carry from society. The blanket assumption that all of Africa is in poverty is one stereotype that is depicted in society with the help of donation commercials. In America, we tend to be culturally bias which was something we all had to be conscious of before departing for our trip and kept in check” (Journee, 2018).

“Throughout this course, I reflected on my positionality. After hearing some of my peers speak about the reasons they took this class, such as reconnecting with their ancestors and understanding a part of their identity, I questioned why I, a white, privileged woman, am a part of this course. Am I able to embody the story of the Middle Passage, a story of dehumanization and pain? I chose to take the course because I felt like I would be able to explore many of my interests in one space--dance, religious studies, colonial studies, power and knowledge, and French. Throughout my college career, my studies have shown that I am committed to matters of representation. However, I am not directly implicated by my studies; I am trying to build cultural competence, trying to understand cultures and religions that are different from my [sic] own” (Maddy, 2018).

### **Theme 2: An Appreciation for the Group Formation and Bonding Process**

“One of the most valuable take aways is the understanding that this experience was so special because of my peers and teachers... We all committed ourselves to the mission of this course--to embody untold stories of oppression and dehumanization--and we invested time and energy to the art form. We worked together to create an intimate and supportive community. We created group values, like a feedback cycle of failure and confidence, a supportive atmosphere, positive communication, inclusivity and awareness, and mutual understanding and respect. We remained committed to these values and upheld them throughout the semester. It was through my relationships with my peers and professors that I gained insight about myself” (Maddy, 2018).

“In conversations, movement, and interactions I have been uncomfortable at times but I have come to realize that allows for the most meaningful realizations and communications. Through the semester, in class especially, discussion was often uncomfortable surrounding the history of slavery and race. Typically, I would be someone to retreat from this [sic] conversation but with the intimacy of the group I felt supported enough to participate openly and honestly. I found through open and honest dialogue, even in the face of discomfort, we were able to discover how to best interact as a group and how to best understand one another. As someone who tends to avoid conflict, I found it was most effective as a group member to speak up when something was not working and I appreciated when others did the same” (Emily, 2018).

“I also have never been so willing to work in a group and letting go of my inhibitions and feelings towards group work. We all made a great team and our involvement with each other through dance has gotten better and powerful before and after Senegal. We always made an effort to help each other if we did not get the movement and always being supportive of one another,” (Jenaya, 2018).

“Being that the class was small, I knew that there would be a family feel. Through the process of becoming a family we went through the different group dynamics of Bruce Tuckman: forming, storming,

norming, performing, and ajuring. From these group dynamics, my reframing of my expectations changed because my classmates helped me whenever they saw me becoming frustrated or not fully understanding the movement. I was fortunate enough to be apart of a group where there was different cultural backgrounds, dance education, and majors. We were all able to teach each other different things and feel like beginners at different stages” (Tanaya, 2018).

### **Theme 3: A Reverence for One’s Identity and Heritage**

“This class has pushed me to submit my DNA test with Ancestry and I am waiting for my result that is coming in about 3 weeks. I am excited to know about where my roots stem [sic] from which will push me to deepen my knowledge about the culture. Although, the class was more about understanding slavery and putting the struggles into an art form, to me it was about liberation and reclaiming my roots” (Yves).

“This reflection is an appreciation to both Professor Shani Collins and Truth Hunter for opening my eyes to not only becoming more of a conscious artist, but teaching me about how my identity and who I am plays an imperative role in how I function in the many spaces I am in. For teaching me to be my authentic self, a Black Caribbean American woman and fully embracing my creativeness and the importance of conveying my narrative to people who might not understand. This reflection also pays homage to my ancestors and those who came before me for giving me the courage and strength to continue on in life” (Jenaya, 2018).

“I journaled about a conversation I had with Moises that happened early in our class process. He had asked me how I felt walking down our auction line during the beginning workings of A(cross) the Water. Being biracial, I’ve been told and have read about having the potential to bridge gaps and bring people of all races together, however have struggled with how exactly I can accomplish this. The brief discussion with Moises sparked my thinking about how I have a special platform as a dancer at Connecticut College and should use my performance opportunities to speak to people. Shows and performance bring people together, so might as well take advantage [sic] of the gathering to convey a message and bring about social change” (Journey, 2018).

### **Theme 4: A Commitment to Being a Socially Responsible Performing Artist**

“Before taking this class, I had never been handed the responsibility to embody such a powerful story. In order to effectively convey the story, I felt like I needed to tap into a focused mental space, a space where I would be able communicate emotions of oppression and bondage” (Maddy, 2018).

“I believe our performance showed the Conn community our unity as a group and made people aware of narratives they wouldn’t necessarily be taught by attending school at a predominantly white institution. It’s important that we depicted the untold stories of slaves with our own interpretation, making it authentic to us and our bodies. The opportunity of showcasing the choreography we created from our experience on Goree island in our prayer circle also gave us another platform to express how we felt (Tanaya, 2018).

“For my future I will am going to apply to graduate schools to gain my masters in Africana Studies continuing my theoretical work on the Caribbean and Black women particularly. I will then continue on to go get [sic] my Ph.d. in Performance Studies and I am hoping through that I will be able to conduct my

research in the Caribbean and Africa. I will be able to further enhance my dance vocabulary and to share the narratives of the Black women within the African Diaspora through dance” (Jenaya, 2018).

“As I have been involved in the dance department for about three years, dance to me is understood as a connection with the highest; form of power of God and the things around me such as nature, earth. It is about having a conversation with the audience and being able to put my story into a form of arts. To me this how dance comes into beauty, it allows me to express myself and gives me the feeling of being relief and freedom” (Yves, 2018).

### **Conclusion**

In retrospect, there was an equal exchange of learning and teaching. We grew more as instructors when we were open to our students’ honest and authentic responses and reflections. This experience has taught us the value of digging deep with our students. To challenge them, even if it makes us uncomfortable in the process. Because of the intensity of this experience, we saw a range of emotions and a tremendous amount of growth. We are so moved by what our students have learned about their identities in this experience that we are now in the process of creating another semester long course that involves a 2-week dance and history intensive in Ghana. The process of creating this course helped us to see that using various disciplines and modes of learning can be effective for students. As instructors, we have to take more creative risks by moving in class learning outside of the walls of the institution in order to holistically transform the lives of our students.

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# Nankama African Dance Conference

February 9-10, 2019

Howard University, Washington DC.

## **PROCEEDINGS**

*“‘The Internet and Africana Dance, Curse or Blessing?’: Is the African Dance We See on the Internet African Dance?”*

**Phylise Smith, Scripps College**

*“The Internet and Africana Dance, Curse or Blessing?’: Is the African Dance We See on the Internet African Dance?”*

Phylise Smith, Scripps College

### **Abstract**

Social media portrays numerous definitions and images for the discipline of African dance. Those with the background and expertise can easily discern “authentic and traditional” African dance. However those without knowledge in this area and needing to do research especially students, may find the social media plethora of African dance information confusing and difficult to define. This paper looks at what is visible when “authentic and traditional” African dance is put in the Google search engine. It also looks at the type of information found when the words “authentic and traditional” African dance are searched in YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Given the results, the paper suggests conclusions for how researchers and scholars of the African dance discipline can use social media to their benefit.

### **Introduction**

According to a November 8, 2017 article in the New York Post, Americans check their phones an average of every ten minutes. They bury their heads in their phones eighty times a day. A Pew Research Study (Smith and Anderson, 2018) reports young adults ages eighteen to twenty-four use some form of social media 94% of the time. Most popular are Snapchat, Instagram and Twitter. People in the age range of thirty to forty-nine use social media 78% of the time while people fifty and older use social media 64% of the time. These statistics suggests two things; one, we spend a lot of time on the Internet and two, the Internet is where we get the majority of our information.

In the past, our social and especially cultural activity took place when we attended live shows, movies and other face to face events. This was especially true for dance. Now due to dance shows like “So you Think you can Dance,” “Dancing with the Stars,” “Dance Moms,” “World of Dance,” the Grammys, the Oscars and other dance infused shows; we can remain in our living

rooms and enjoy dance remotely. Instead of attending a face to face West African dance class, we can practice the steps by watching Internet videos.

### **Why This Topic?**

I first became interested in African dance and social media when I asked my Introduction to West African Dance class at Scripps College to research dances that existed on the African continent. Utilizing the text *African Dance- World of Dance* (Welsh 2010), students were to look online and find information and or videos of the East, South and North African dances mentioned in the text. If they couldn't find these dances, they were to find other dances that came from these areas. While my students had a foundation in the West African dances we studied in class, they were unsure as to whether the numerous dances they found on the Internet were "authentic or traditional."

With this in mind, I decided to research what constituted "authentic and traditional dance for social media. I knew there was a wealth of information for contemporary Africana dance. But was there information on African dances of the past?

With this question in mind, my paper does the following. It utilizes as its base, the Kariamuwelsh definition of "authentic and traditional" African dance, and through an observational approach provides a view of what is shown across social media as "authentic and traditional" African dance. Based upon what is found; the paper suggests conclusions as to how the Internet can further the study of "authentic and traditional" African dance as well as contemporary Africana dance.

### **African Dance Definitions**

The Internet Dictionary Wikipedia says: **African dance** refers

mainly to the dance of Sub-Saharan Africa, and more appropriately African dances because of the many cultural differences in musical and movement styles. These dances must be viewed in close connection with Sub-Saharan African music traditions and [Bantu cultivation of rhythm](#). African dance utilizes the concept of as well as total body articulation. Wikipedia goes on to say that “African Dances teach social patterns and values and help people work, mature, praise or criticize members of the community while celebrating festivals and funerals, competing, reciting history, proverbs and poetry; and to encounter gods. African dances are largely participatory, with spectators being part of the performance. With the exception of some spiritual, religious or initiation dances, there are traditionally no barriers between dancers and onlookers. Even ritual dances often have a time when spectators participate.” (Feb 2019)

Encyclopedia Britannica defines African dance

as performing art deeply woven into the social fabric of Africa and generally involving aspects of music and theatre as well as rhythmic bodily movement. In African societies, dance serves a complex diversity of social purposes. Within an indigenous dance tradition, each performance usually has a principal as well as a number of subsidiary purposes, which may express or reflect the communal values and social relationships of the people. In order to distinguish between the varieties of dance styles, therefore, it is necessary to establish the purpose for which each dance is performed.” (February 2019)

Other definitions of African dance include Pearl Primus’ definition.

“Dance is the soul of Africa. It is the foundation of all of the arts and weaves a tale about the daily lives of the people. Dance in Africa is a pragmatic part of life” (Welsh, 20)

According to Dr. Ofoosuwa Abiola,

“Africana dance is understood to be African dance and dance with African foundations in Africa, the Americas, and all other locations in the African Diaspora.” (2018)

Abiola’s definition is comprehensive in that it includes past and contemporary African dance.

However for the purposes of this paper, I would like to unpack aspects of the “Africana dance” definition and utilize the “foundational” definition of “African dance that Kariamuwelsh provides.

“African dance can be defined as a collection of dances that are imbued with meaning, infused purposely with rhythm, and connected to the ritual events, occasions, and mythologies of a specific people”(16)

Welsh goes on to say that the dances (in her text)

“represent ancient and past traditions that may not be operative, applicable or even viable today.”

Yet for the paper, I still wanted to use her definition to set the standard for my research and see what it would yield.

### **Google and YouTube**

First, I googled traditional African dance. The “hits” I received were ten best traditional dances, African dance definitions, African dance history, African music videos and other hits such as African clothing. I received some of the same references when I put “authentic’ African dance in the Google search engine. Further, the use of the word “authentic” unearthed a few different results such as dance and music from Namibia and Botswana as opposed to dance and music solely from West Africa.

When I went to YouTube, I found hip-hop and modern dances that included West African movements. What I found suggested that though I used only the two words, “authentic and traditional,” anything and everything relating to Africa appeared in the results.

To YouTube’s credit, I found “authentic and traditional sources on YouTube such as a 1950’s dance from the Congo. I did have to scroll for some time to locate this dance. But at least it was there. The question becomes whether those looking for “authentic and traditional” African dance will take the time to scroll rather than assuming that what’s presented at the top is automatically authentic and traditional. This is where social media may be misleading.

### **Facebook. Twitter, Instagram**

A Facebook search using the terms “authentic and traditional” African dance revealed West African dance groups, individual posts, local events, and some of the same videos seen on YouTube.

In Twitter, when I put in the hashtag “authentic and traditional” African dance, I saw numerous tweets about African dance events. One interesting post noted how some African dancers weren’t performing “authentic” African dance. (2016)

In Instagram, the search terms yielded a number of posts and images including pictures of animals and other images not directly focused on African dance. Further, when I used the hashtag “authentic” in Instagram, there were no posts.

Images on Pinterest were similar to those on Instagram with Pinterest images and post showing media from YouTube and Flickr.

### **Conclusion**

How social media portrays African, Africana dance is a topic that needs in-depth research. My initial look shows that the words “authentic and traditional” African dance results in a litany of images, videos, tweets, ads, and a variety of written information. It also shows that the barrage of information multiplies if one searches the Internet using just the words “African Dance.”

Is the portrayal of African dance on the Internet, a curse or is it a blessing? I suggest that given what’s portrayed as “African dance on the Internet, the word “confusing” is more precise than the word “curse.” Yet due to this confusion, scholars with expertise in the discipline have a responsibility to African and Africana dance on the Internet.

The first responsibility is that we need to educate and guide students and interested others to look at what’s on the Internet and social media with a critical eye. The second responsibility is to continue to provide scholarly books, journals and articles as a foundation for students to build

upon so they have a background when they do research the Internet. A third responsibility is a community responsibility and connected to what we want our students to see on the Internet.

What if we put on social media, the videos, images and tweets that depict African and Africana dances in the way they should be depicted? This is being done but can be done on a larger scale. It may be in our best interests to make sure that we as researchers and scholars within the African and Africana dance discipline participate regularly on social media or employ social media assistants to post for us. In this way, the Internet becomes blessings- blessings which we do not block.

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**Selected Slides From Presentation**

**African  
Dance and  
the  
Internet –  
Curse or  
Blessing?**

**Phylise Smith  
Nankama African Dance  
Conference  
Howard University  
February 9, 2019**

**Americans check their phones 80 times a day.**  
**The average person struggles to go more than 10 minutes without checking their phone.**  
**Of 2000 people surveyed, 1 in 10 check their phones on average once every 4 minutes.**

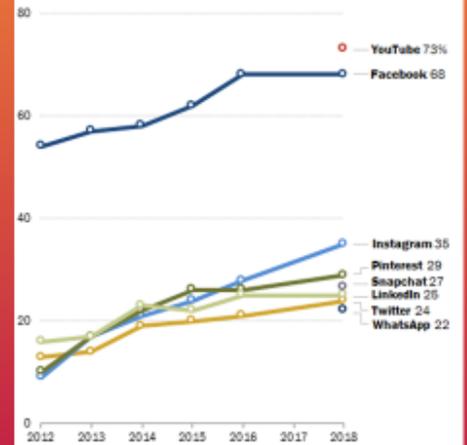


# Pew Research Study

Figure 1: Pew Research Center  
(Social Media Use in 2018)

## Majority of Americans now use Facebook, YouTube

% of U.S. adults who say they use the following social media sites online or on their cellphone

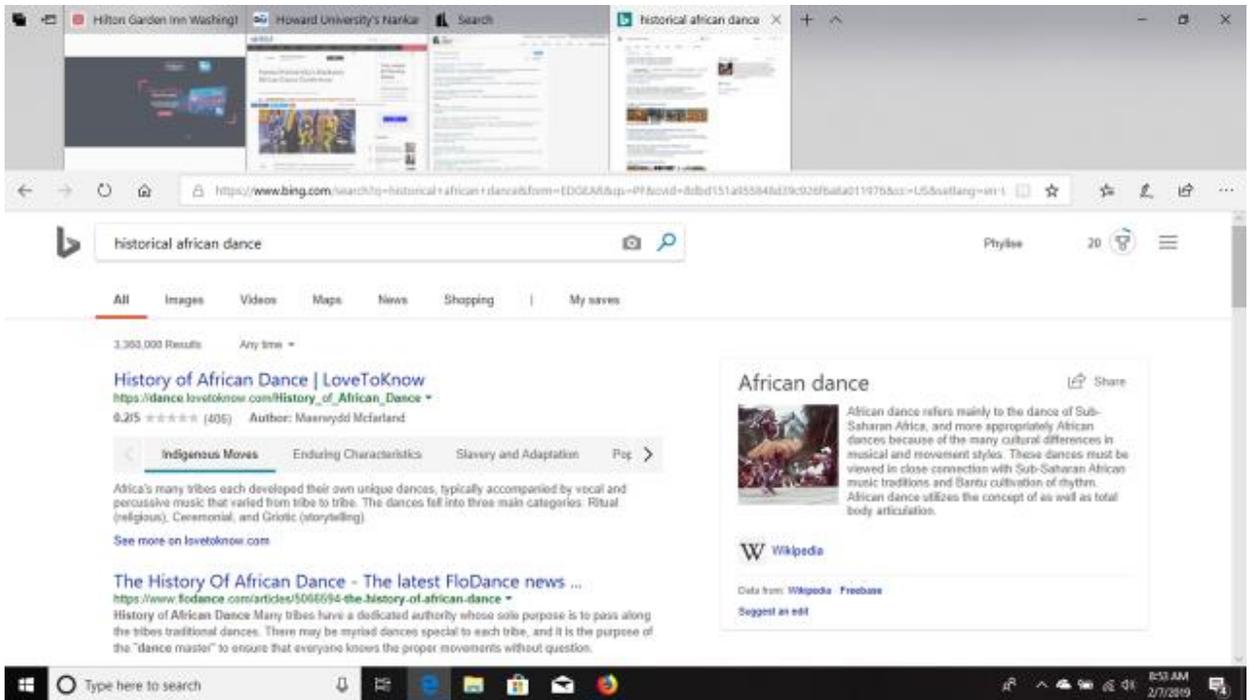


Note: Pre-2018 telephone poll data is not available for YouTube, Snapchat or WhatsApp.  
Source: Survey conducted Jan. 3-10, 2018. Trend data from previous Pew Research Center surveys.  
"Social Media Use in 2018"  
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

## Popular Dance Shows on TV

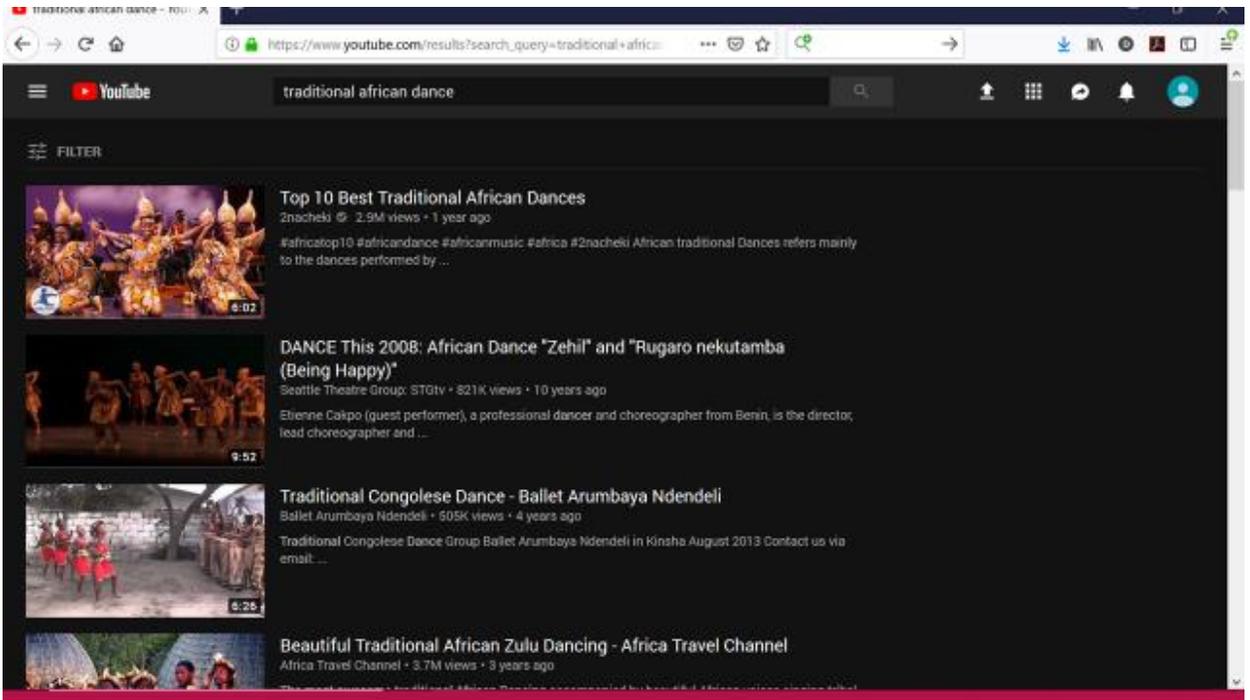
- So You Think You Can Dance
- Dance Moms
- Bring It
- Bunheads
- Strictly Come Dancing
- Flesh and Bone
- Solid Gold
- World of Dance

(Eight Best Dance TV Shows in 2018)



## Google Search for Traditional African Dance





## Authentic African Dance



## Mr. V - Put Your Drink Down



Youtube Search  
Get your Drink On African  
Style Choreography

<https://youtu.be/6ZLgIphVoz8>

authentic african dance - Facebo x

https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=authentic%20african%20dance&opa=SEARCH\_BOX

Authentic African Dance

Filter Results

POSTS FROM

- Anyone
- You
- Your Friends
- Your Groups and Pages
- Public
- Choose a Source...

POST TYPE

- All Posts
- Posts You've Seen

POSTED IN GROUP

- Any group
- Your Groups
- Choose a Group...

TAGGED LOCATION

- Anywhere
- Portland, Oregon
- Choose a Location...

Links

Authentic African Dancers  
Authentic African Dancers, Cell Code  
cellcode.us  
Jan 5

Authentic African Dance Drumming  
Authentic African Dance Drumming, Home Security  
homesecurity.press  
Dec 15, 2016

African Healing Dance  
Step-by-step instruction in six authentic dances to rejuvenate life and create healing.  
soundstrus.com  
Jul 1, 2018 · 1 share

Photos

English (US) · Español · Português (Brasil) · Français (France) · Deutsch

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Chat (Off)

traditional authentic african dance

https://twitter.com/search/?q=traditional+authentic+african+dance&src=typed

traditional authentic african dance

Search filters · Help

From anyone

Anywhere

All languages

Quality filter on

Advanced search

New to Twitter?  
Sign up now to get your own personalized timeline!

Sign up

Have an account? Log in

Phone, email, or username

Password

Remember me · Forgot password?

Log in

New to Twitter?

Sign up

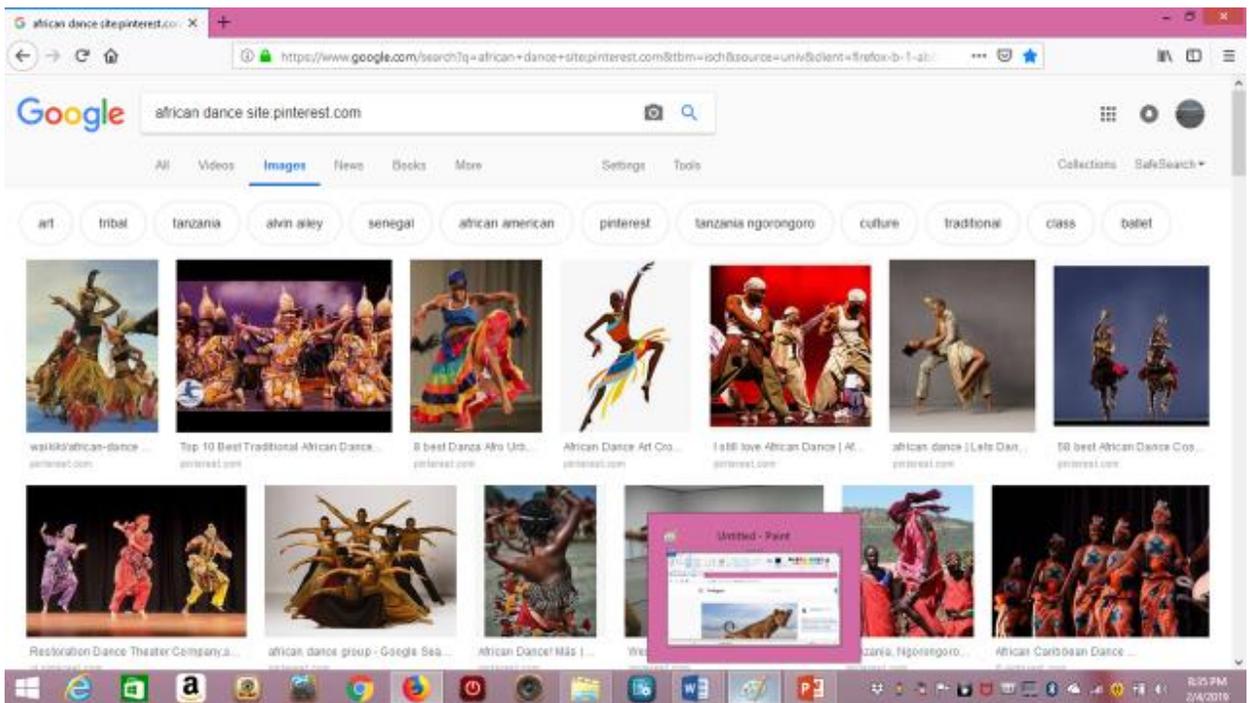
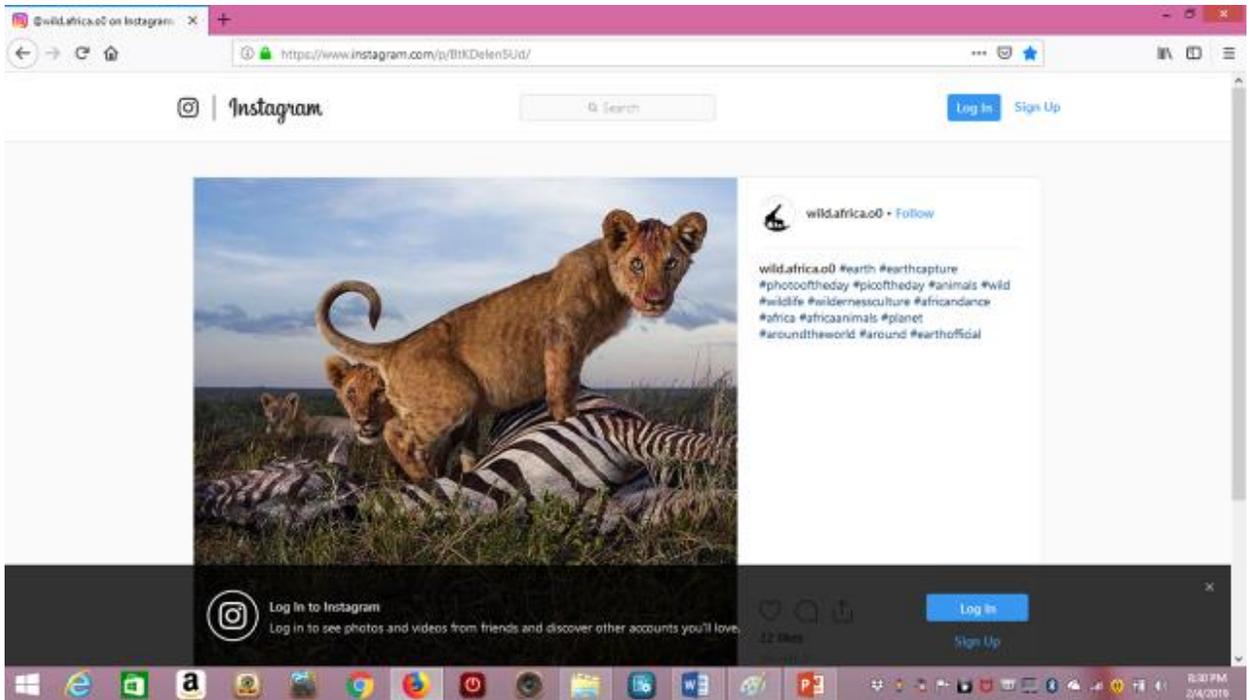
The Edge Collector @aficandinagr · 22 Jan 2017  
Definitely a playlist for those interested in **authentic traditional African dance** culture.

Krissy the Princess @KrissyKares · 15 Feb 2016  
Those African dancers aren't **authentic African dance** is not a joke therefore **traditional** garments should only be worn in the presence of real

Casey Theivagt @SOTYPEA · 8 Mar 2014  
Stephen and his family welcoming Leah with **authentic traditional African dance**! #AmazingWedding! [instagram.com/p/0ITV5t69MJ/](https://www.instagram.com/p/0ITV5t69MJ/)

Mitch Blunt® @MitchArbee · 21 Sep 2010  
Lmao at the cirque d' Africa ad. '**authentic and traditional African dance**' yet they have those giant joyos in the ad. Pretty **authentic**. =p

8:24 PM 2/4/2018



## **Conclusions**

- 1. Continue to provide scholarly books, journals, articles to give our students foundations to build upon.**
- 2. With the information we provide our students, they can use this knowledge to decipher and sift through the wealth of internet social media, to decide what's "fake" and "what's real."**
- 3. It may be in our best interests to either do it ourselves and/or employ social media assistants that can post on Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, the type of media we believe should portray authentic African and Africana dance.**