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# Sankofa Healing: A Womanist Analysis of the Retrieval and Transformation of African Ritual Dance

Karli Sherita Robinson-Myers

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SANKOFA HEALING: A WOMANIST ANALYSIS OF THE RETRIEVAL AND  
TRANSFORMATION OF AFRICAN RITUAL DANCE

by

KARLI ROBINSON-MYERS

Under the Direction of Monique Moultrie, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

African American women who reach back into their (known or perceived) African ancestry, retrieve the rituals of that heritage (through African dance), and transform them to facilitate healing for their present communities, are engaging a process that I define as “Sankofa Healing.” Focusing on the work of Katherine Dunham as an exemplar, I will weave through her journey of retrieving and transforming African dance into ritual, and highlight what I found to be key components of this transformative process. Drawing upon Ronald Grimes’ ritual theory, and engaging the womanist body of thought, I will explore the impact that the process has on African-American women and their communities.

INDEX WORDS: African-American religion, African dance, healing, ritual theory, womanist

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TRANSFORMATION OF AFRICAN RITUAL DANCE

by

KARLI ROBINSON-MYERS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Masters of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2015

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2015

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May 2015

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to the beautiful beings that I have been blessed to birth and nurture: Douglas (DJ) Myers, Devin Myers, and Camron Myers. I love you my sweet boys, don't forget. To my parents, Douglas and Connie Robinson for their constant willingness to listen to each and every stress and success throughout this process. Thanks for standing beside me no matter what, I could not have done this without your support. To my mentor, sister, teacher and friend Ada-Belinda DancingLion, whose wisdom has taught me about myself so that I could become the woman who could make it successfully through this experience. To THE best brothers in the world, Therrell Gordon, Eric Robinson and Isaac Robinson, and to my dear friend and sister Natasha Harrison (Ayodele, Ajani and Ifetayo) thanks for all the support and advice. To my extended family, dear friends/professors, and fellow graduate students, thank you for every encouraging word, every dinner invitation and every kick in the pants that gave me just what I needed at the perfect time. I give thanks to the energies, gods and the God that sustains me. Finally, to the righteous ancestors, especially Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, thank you for dancing me through, and speaking to me in my first language-dance. To my ancestral counsel Grandma Lillie McGuire, Grandma Helen Lucas, Great Aunt Mae Boyd (Auntie), my sister Tammy Robinson, and my cousin Dana Robinson. I love you and miss you so much. My hope is that this work is used for the highest and greatest good of all involved and that you are pleased at this small contribution to our continuing story. And so it is, Ashe.

-Neith Shekar Sankofa

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Sankofa Healing Defined

*Sankofa* is an African word, in the language of the Akan tribe in Ghana that literally translates to “it is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind.”<sup>1</sup> The word, its meaning and its adoption into the lives of many African Americans could in itself be an example of the way in which African culture is shared and distributed throughout the African diaspora.<sup>2</sup> Though I will not be investigating African American’s relationship with (or knowledge of) the concept, I will be evaluating an instance of its application using the academic and professional journey of dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham.

Katherine Dunham is most known for her impact on the modern dance community through the creation of the “Dunham Technique.” What is less known is that Ms. Dunham created the technique as a direct result of her anthropological work in Haiti in the 1930’s. Dunham’s goal was to study African derived dance forms, and to also gain an understanding of a part of her ancestral culture through dance. Dunham’s work is an exemplar of how African ritual dance has been reinterpreted by African American women and imported into their communities to promote various levels of healing.

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<sup>1</sup> Taken from Berea College’s Carter G. Woodson Center for Interracial Education website. The word is derived from SAN (return), KO (go) and FA (look, seek and take). The symbol is usually seen as a bird with feet facing forward, but its head facing backward placing an egg on its back. Another version of the Sankofa symbol is a stylized heart symbol. The Akan believe that there must be movement and new learning as time passes, but as this forward march proceeds the knowledge of the past must never be forgotten. <http://www.berea.edu/cgwc/the-power-of-sankofa/>

<sup>2</sup> The term(s) African American, Negro or Black will be defined as persons who share a common ethnic and/or cultural heritage that connects them through the inherited or reclaimed practices and traditions of Africa. Primarily, this shared heritage is as a result of African traditions that have been retained and/or adapted by the descendants of enslaved West Africans, or through contact with the African diasporic community. This term relates to those that identify with this ethnic/racial group primarily through self-identification. Though others may be identified as African American, “negro” or “black” through birth identification or social categorization, the premises of my thesis (especially in regards to womanist thought) are best served by reserving space for self-identification with the category. However, I believe that the Sankofa Healing process extends beyond the boundaries of self-identification for people of African descent.

Healing and healing ritual are key terms throughout my analysis. As it relates to the idea of an African worldview, I will be viewing the concept of healing based on theorist Connie Rapoo's definition of it as "ritualized moments of reinforcing social cohesion and cultural integrity after disruptive and/or traumatic experiences of place."<sup>3</sup> This definition takes on additional meaning as I will be addressing healing as it relates to dance from what scholars Nicole Monteiro and Diana Wall describe as an "African worldview." In their work they outline that in the African context, there is a relationship between illnesses (physical and social) and healing. They theorize that "the African worldview is based on spiritual and communal paradigms that are useful in understanding indigenous and Diasporic healing approaches."<sup>4</sup> Monteiro and Wall's research is focused on how women participating in Zar, Ndeup, and Guinea ritual dance, as well as women of African descent in the United States, are using ritual dance for physical and emotional healing.<sup>5</sup>

Because I want to center on some of the reasons why African American women may be drawn to use healing ritual dance, and some of the history of that use, I will be focusing on African American women's role in this type of healing. I chose African American women (represented by Dunham's experience) for this project because of the ways in which they are carriers and keepers of traditions in the African American community. Specifically, I will outline several areas where African American women's experiences are helpful in understanding the Sankofa Healing model. African American women have both a history of resistance, and a legacy of passing down ancestral knowledge and tradition. They have also been central to activist movements using art forms (to include theatre and dance). Finally, African American

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<sup>3</sup> Connie Rapoo, "Performing Cultural Memory And The Symbolic" In *Matatu: Journal For African Culture & Society*, 192.

<sup>4</sup> Monteiro and Wall, "African Dance as Healing Modality Throughout the Diaspora: The Use of Ritual and Movement to Work Through Trauma", 235.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 243.

women have been central to discussions about and the progression of the views of black bodies (i.e. ritual and embodiment practices). They are therefore an ideal group to explore the Sankofa Healing methodology.

Essentially, Monteiro and Wall propose that, dance in Africa was one of the methods used to heal issues of the spirit that manifested itself into specific conflicts in the individual and the community.<sup>6</sup> In discussing how the African worldview of dance has transferred into African American culture, they state that “traditional African dance as taught and practiced in the West has also taken on a therapeutic function, e.g., women intentionally utilizing African dance for self-therapy and community building.”<sup>7</sup> I assert that, for Katherine Dunham and other women participating in this process in America, African dance extends beyond its individual therapeutic properties to serve as a catalyst for healing the African American community.

The African American community subscribes to commonalities that connect them through inherited practices and traditions. These commonalities I argue are mainly a result of African traditions that have been retained and/or adapted by the descendants of enslaved Africans, or through contact with the African diasporic community. These traditions are referred to as African retentions or Africanisms. My view of the presence of Africanisms is through the lens of theorist Portia Maultsby who asserts that “Africanisms ...exist as conceptual approaches-unique ways of doing thing and making things happen-rather than as specific cultural elements.”<sup>8</sup>

The descendants of enslaved Africans in America have been spread across many nations. Slavery and colonization have encouraged the blending of their traditions with other cultures, and in some cases these traditions have been transformed or completely lost. The most prominent scholar to theorize about the difficulties of connecting African traditions and the practices and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 236.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 249.

<sup>8</sup> Portia Maultsby as cited by Joseph E. Holloway in *Africanisms in American Culture*, xvii.

beliefs of African-Americans is cultural anthropologist E. Franklin Frazier. Frazier argued that no recognizable retentions remained of the beliefs, practices and traditions of enslaved Africans. His work included looking at many diasporic communities and whether or not they retained the traditions of their African past. In his evaluation of the family structures of Afro-Brazilians he stated that “there are no rigid, consistent patterns of behavior that can be traced to African culture.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the African American culture in his opinion was one that grew out of the experiences enslaved Africans had in the Americas but had no traceable connections to African traditions.

Though arguments like Frazier’s make it difficult to assert that aspects of African-American culture are rooted in African tradition, many have argued against this concept when writing about cultures that grow out of or parallel to another. Several theorists have called attention to the multiple factors that contribute to determining whether or not retentions exist. Scholars like Richard Price and Sidney W. Mintz agree with some aspects of Frazier’s argument, but stress that a singular view of retention, with the emphasis being on physical markers that remain in a culture, exclude the social component that creates cultural expression. For them, “treating culture as a list of traits or objects or words is to miss the manner in which social relations are carried on through it-and thus to ignore the most important way in which it can change or be changed.”<sup>10</sup>

One of the first scholars to argue for African retentions (and the most well-known critic of Frazier’s theory) is anthropologist Melville Herskovits, a mentor of my exemplar Katherine Dunham. Melville Herskovits is an anthropologist and professor whose work in the 1930s

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<sup>9</sup> Wiggan, Greg. "Afrocentricity and the Black Intellectual Tradition: Carter G. Woodson, W. E. B. Du Bois, and E. Franklin Frazier." *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 138.

<sup>10</sup> Mintz, Sidney W., and Richard Price. "The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Approach", 22.

focused on what was then described as “primitive cultures.”<sup>11</sup> In his research and writing on the Dahomey culture (modern day Benin), he drew parallels between the diasporic African community and their “negro” descendants in America.<sup>12</sup>

Though many enslaved persons came from the same part of the African continent, shared some of the same ways of living, and were exposed to similar imports of missionary influence and imperialism, I do not attempt to create a totalizing theory that applies to all of them. Neither am I arguing for the persistence of African retentions for African Americans, though I wholeheartedly believe the traditions are living and breathing in the everyday lives of American people, especially those of African descent. There is however an extensive documented history of enslaved people in the Americas, one that may encourage African Americans to orient themselves toward the concept of a singular African American community experience. While the diversity of those experiences may be vast, categorization and social status in America has lead some African Americans to seek out experiences that focus on reclaiming their lost or unknown heritage.

In my analysis, I assert that some African American women reach back into their (known or perceived) African ancestry, retrieve the rituals of that heritage (through African dance), and transform them to facilitate healing for their present communities, a process that I define as “Sankofa Healing.” Focusing on the work of Katherine Dunham as an exemplar, I will weave through her journey of retrieving and transforming African dance into ritual, and highlight what I found to be key components of this transformative process. To help illustrate the relationship

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<sup>11</sup> The term “primitive”, especially during the time of Dunham’s academic studies, has been used to describe the cultural and religious beliefs that are indigenous to the people of Africa. This term is modernly considered pejorative and will only be used where the authors specifically indicate its use. Otherwise, “indigenous” or “traditional” will be substituted.

<sup>12</sup> The term Negro is synonymous with Black or African American for the purposes of my thesis. This term will be used where Katherine Dunham mentions the term in her writings.

between Dunham's choreography and African ritual dance, I have included video clips (links) in the footnotes. These visual representations will help to support my points in two ways. They establish a context for the African dances I discuss and show the physical and thematic similarities of these dances with Dunham's choreography. They also allow Dunham and the other women I've highlighted, to speak for their own work through interviews and performance talks. Throughout my analysis, I will engage the womanist body of thought to explore the impact that the process has on African-American women and their communities. The links provided further support the womanist framework I have chosen by honoring the actual voices of these women in my analysis. Other links point to documentaries and other supporting visual aids, providing additional layers of understanding of the Sankofa Healing process. Drawing upon Ronald Grimes' ritual theory, I will explore what impact Sankofa Healing has on the communities participating in or exposed to it. Finally, I will examine what an extension of this work has to offer the academy of religion.

## 1.2 Womanism

Womanist, derived from the word *womanish* is defined by Alice Walker as “a black feminist or feminist of color.”<sup>13</sup> Walker points out that it is a historical descriptor from black mother to daughter when she (the daughter) was attempting to take on the characteristics of a woman. The academic methodology inspired by the word “womanish” was created from a primarily Christian viewpoint as a way to address the needs of black women in American society. Womanism goes further than just a label for black feminist, but serves as an affirmation of the needs, strength and voices of black women. In Walker's definition “womanism is to

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<sup>13</sup> Walker, Alice. *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens*, xi.

feminism as purple is to lavender.”<sup>14</sup> The womanist community is one that has “demanded and created theological and communal spaces for [African American women’s] voices...with an intention for all members of the community who have been marginalized [to be heard].”<sup>15</sup>

There are many relevant methodologies that could be employed in viewing my thesis topic; however, I will be using a womanist lens because it gives space for black women’s voices and experiences- to include to some extent that of the scholar. Therefore, I will allow my analytical voice to be heard among those of the theorists and exemplar. Though I am a member of the womanist community, I offer analysis (at times informed by my experience) with and not for the community.

As the womanist movement developed, scholarship emerged that was considered outside of the realm of traditional womanist thought and extended beyond the black church experience. As the field progressed, womanist thought moved beyond privileging the heterosexual, African American Christian woman’s experience to being inclusive of other women of color, other faith perspectives and the gay, lesbian and transgender community. It also began to allow for the theoretical use of womanist thought, while minimizing the evocation of womanist theology. Opening up the field meant that the once accepted singular way of looking at black culture, black bodies and black experiences took a noticeable shift. Black Cultural Studies scholar Victor Anderson wrote that the monolithic way that black culture has been identified has also helped to determine the style of black scholarship. He notes that in an effort to identify with and be

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<sup>14</sup> Walker, Alice. *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens*, xi.

<sup>15</sup> Darnise C. Martin, “Is This the Dance Floor or a Revival Meeting? Theological Questions and Challenges from the Underground House Music Movement”, in *Ain’t I a Womanist Too? Third Wave Womanist Thought*, 81.

accepted into white scholarship and in an effort to build black community ties, the study of the diverse black experience has been stifled.<sup>16</sup>

While there are areas of my thesis research that corroborate long standing trends in the black community, I do so keeping Anderson's analysis in mind. It is my intent to address the trends in scholarship while acknowledging the individual journey of the exemplar I am highlighting, Katherine Dunham. I am dissecting one woman's experience while fully aware that her story is woven into the histories of other women of color, other black people's experiences, and into the complex histories of the United States and Haiti.

The creation of a combination of personal and historical experiences in order to create a vehicle for self-identification is called biomythography, and is a concept introduced by Audre Lorde in her work *Zami*. Stacey Floyd-Thomas and Laura Gillman define biomythography as a "deliberate amalgamation of autobiographical fact and mythically resonant fiction that locates the struggle for moral agency and self-identity in a context of social oppression."<sup>17</sup> The biomythography concept is useful in understanding the relationship between the Sankofa Healing process and those participating in it. For my discussion of Dunham, biomythography provides a basis for understanding how her race, gender, communities and education informed how she developed and imported her choreography for social change.

I borrow the formula of using an exemplar (Dunham) to highlight the struggle and progress of African American women from one of the progenitors of womanist theology, Delores Williams. In her book *Sisters in the Wilderness the Challenges of Womanist God-Talk*, Williams uses the biblical figure Hagar to personify issues that she felt were commonalities for black

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<sup>16</sup> Victor Anderson, "Scholarly Aesthetics and the Religious Critic Black Experience as Manifolds of Manifestations and Powers of Presentations" in *Ain't I a Womanist Too? Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought*, 204.

<sup>17</sup> Floyd-Thomas, Stacey M. and Laura Gillman. "The Whole Story is what I'm After": Womanist Revolutions and Liberation Feminist Revelations through Biomythography and Emancipatory Historiography." *Black Theology: An International Journal*, 184.



women. I was intrigued by Williams' formulaic use of the Hagar story for her investigation. As Williams highlights, "...with the slave woman Hagar at the center of attention [the story] illustrates what the history of many African American women taught them long ago; that is, the slave woman's story is and unavoidably has been shaped by the problems and desires of her owners."<sup>18</sup> This type of framework is useful in my investigation because like Williams, I will not only be looking at the process, but also at what aspects of Dunham's communal relationships contribute to the Sankofa Healing processes potential causes, uses and effectiveness.

Sankofa Healing is a theoretical process that I developed using the theme of Sankofa (go back and fetch) put into physical action, coupled with the intention of using the acquired knowledge, tools, or ideals to help, heal or "change for the better" the conditions (ills) of the African American community. I will outline the nuances of defining community, ills and healing throughout the thesis, but largely these aspects are self-identified and self-determined. Though there are many places that I see Katherine Dunham's journey mirroring the Sankofa Healing process, the process is more accurately a reflection of what I observed in her journey. In the areas where I view the process and Dunham's work side by side it is only to illuminate specific areas where the process can be applied to her work, not as an assumption that she intentionally followed my theoretical process, or the principles of Sankofa.

In an effort to overlay her journey with what I envision the process to encompass, my analysis will be separated by the three parts of the Sankofa Healing process, based on the three aspects of the Sankofa definition. The first is the recognition of ills (social problems) in the community and the seeking of healing elements that will assist in mitigating them. The second is

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<sup>18</sup> In this structure, Williams uses the biblical texts Genesis 16:1-16 and Genesis 21:9-21 as the basis of her discussion. Williams uses the research by biblical scholars Phyllis Tribble and Elsa Tamez, which focuses on the details of Hagar's journey, as the baseline for her focus. Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness the Challenges of Womanist God-Talk*, 15.

the retrieval of those healing elements (in this instance African ritual dance) and their transformation to fit community needs. The third is the import of the transformed elements into the community to facilitate communal healing, and an evaluation of their effects. This structure as in Williams' example, will provide a framework to view the work of Dunham, informed by ritual theory and using womanist thought as a lens to evaluate some of the ways in which African American women are uniquely affected or empowered by this process.

## **2 SEEING SICKNESS AND SEEKING HELP**

### **2.1 Katherine Dunham: Background and Training**

Author, scholar-activist, dancer and choreographer Katherine Dunham, the daughter of an interracial couple (an Indian and French Canadian mother and a Madagascan and West African father), was born on June 22, 1909 and raised with considerable affluence at an early age. However, when her mother died when she was four years old, her family's finances were greatly reduced. As a result, she experienced an influx of racial prejudice that she had not experienced previously, and therefore developed an awareness of the ways in which her mixed heritage was viewed in her community. Dunham began to increase her awareness of both sides of her heritage in order to bridge racial conflicts among her family and in her community.<sup>19</sup>

After high school, Dunham attended a junior college and eventually enrolled at the University of Chicago, majoring in the newly formed field of anthropology. Though she experienced racism at the University of Chicago that she described as "tak[ing] innocents by

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<sup>19</sup> Dunham described in her memoirs that she learned from her childhood experiences to be "an intermediary between classes and races and later, a 'culture broker' for her dancers, her students, and people of different cultures." Joyce Aschenbrenner, *Katherine Dunham: Dancing a Life*, 8.

surprise and deeply wound the trusting,” she found guidance and comfort in several of her university instructors.<sup>20</sup> Most notably were her dance teacher Ludmilla Speranzeva and noted anthropologists Robert Redfield and Melville Herskovits.<sup>21</sup> Dunham’s enjoyment of the learning environment established a communal connection to it. In essence, she built a relationship with and took part in the academic community in a way that was similar to her childhood one.

Integral to the understanding of the Sankofa Healing process is the establishment of community. The process calls for the participants to retrieve African traditions and bring them back to facilitate healing for their communities. Therefore an identification of the communities that they are participating with in this process has to be determined before an identification of any ills can be made. For Dunham, the two communities that she hoped to transform were her African American and academic ones. For women of color, during Dunham’s time and since, these two communities have sustained continuing conversations about the ills that plague them. Dunham, having already come to terms with the racial identity conflicts of her childhood was also met with the challenges of being an African American woman in academia, with a desire to incorporate her interest in dance with her studies.

Both Redfield and Herskovits initially encouraged Dunham to pursue her interests in combining her African heritage and art (dance) in her academic pursuits.<sup>22</sup> She received a grant

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Redfield is an anthropologist and professor with a focus in the “area studies model” and acculturation. His primary work was to look at cultures through an objective lens while pointing out the ways in which cultures borrowed from each other and merged. His focus was to insure that academia provided critical analysis free of the potentially narrow influences of social and academic politics. He believed that academia had the power to influence the larger American culture. Sartori, Andrew. "Robert Redfield's Comparative Civilization Project and the Political Imagination of Postwar America." *Positions*, 35.

Herskovits hoped to use his anthropological research to study racial and national division in the United States. His contribution was one of the first scholarly works to view African culture in a way that differed from prevailing cultural stereotypes. His work highly influenced the work of Katherine Dunham. Coundouriotis, Eleni. "Nation, History, and the Idea of Cultural Origin in Melville Herskovits." *Diaspora: A Journal Of Transnational Studies*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> Dunham talks about her move away from the traditional anthropological studies of Herskovits and Redfield by incorporating her love of dance. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N4nCirfyHUK> Visionaryproject. “Katherine

from the Rosenwald Fund in 1935 in order to research the function of dance in the rituals and community life of what was then described as “primitive” cultures under the direction of Herskovits.<sup>23</sup> Dunham wrote about her various experiences with academia, but in regards to its relationship to dance she wrote:

“[Academia] should study religion in its relation to dance, and have a course in religious dance to overcome prejudice against dance communities where it exists. The subject should be approached on the basis of the relationship of all things to the American Negro; the tribal and cultural strains which make up the people; and an examination of the music and arts which make up the cultural strains.”<sup>24</sup>

For Dunham the intersection between dance, scholarship and African Americans was fertile academic and personal ground, but it was met with concerns from her University mentors. She received inquiries about her approach to research and was at one point encouraged to redirect her efforts by her mentor Herskovits. His concerns were that she lacked academic distance as evidenced in her choice to participate in traditional African dance and the ritual that accompanied it. For Dunham, and for other scholars of African ritual dance, the two are interconnected and thus must be studied in tandem. Dunham chose to conduct her study by observation and by physically participating in the embodiment of it. Her choice was perceived as unusual not only because of her participation in it, but also because of the historical view of how academics should study and engage ritual activity.

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Dunham: My Love for Dance.” Online Video Clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, Mar 17, 2010. Web. Accessed 10 January 2015.

<sup>23</sup>Durkin, Hannah. "Dance Anthropology and the Impact of 1930S Haiti on Katherine Dunham's Scientific and Artistic Consciousness." *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 124.

Dunham’s anthropological study was for eighteen months in Haiti to study Vodun rituals as they related to dance. This was an incredible undertaking especially for an undergraduate student. The terms of the grant required Dunham to undergo a six month training session with Herskovits at Northwestern University prior to leaving to conduct her research. Ibid, 127.

<sup>24</sup> Dorathi Bock Pierre, “A Talk with Katherine Dunham,” in *Kaiso!* 250.

Ritual theorist Ronald Grimes sees these types of historical guidelines as misrepresentation or misunderstanding of ritual (especially in the social sciences). He attributes this to a historical reliance on what he calls “visualism.”<sup>25</sup> This equates to the tendency to rely on prevailing interpretations of ritual activity, which may be based on antiquated understandings of specific groups, gained through observation versus interaction. He argues that “visualism” is a disservice to ritual studies as “it amounts to ethnocentrism not in the form of ethnic prejudice but in the form of epistemological bias.”<sup>26</sup> The re-investigation of the pre-colonial African way of society, as evidenced in the material and cultural arts, is what womanist Renee Harrison says is needed for scholars to “offer a corrective to the to the colonial historiographer’s often barbaric, false or simply misleading representation.”<sup>27</sup> Dunham’s choice of subject area and methodology was an attempt to counter the misrepresentations of Africans, African dance and the modalities of anthropological research.

Because what is often studied in the social sciences extends beyond what can be proven in an empirical way, the approach to concepts and data has to be handled differently. The totality of the potential effectiveness of African ritual dance is not based on concepts that can be completely evaluated in scientific ways (or theorized about solely in traditional academic terms). Dunham’s research was the first of its kind to engage in and theorize about the dances of Africa in a new way. She did this through the extension of her methodology via the use of the “tools” of the religious tradition she was studying.

Dunham’s challenges while studying African ritual dance in part relates to Grimes’ criticism of the use of theory, especially when attempting to “substantiate” claims in academia. According to Grimes there is little space for researchers and scholars to say what they really

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<sup>25</sup> Ronald Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 167.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Renee K. Harrison, *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America*, 31.

think unless someone of greater notability has already said what it is they are claiming. He adds that “underwritten by a named theory or theorist, an author who is not yet a Name [sic] can at least say something that will be read as correct.”<sup>28</sup> Grimes is speaking about an individual scholar’s ability to be heard on a topic, but this line of thought can be extended to include minority areas of scholarship as well. This type of academic substantiation can make it difficult to bring forward new understandings of already minimally investigated subject areas like the uses of African dance in relation to ritual. Dunham’s detailed evaluation and documentation of this focused area of research (Vodun African dances) served as a catalyst for understanding the relationship between ritual and African dance. Her goal of bringing greater understanding to this research area was an affirmation of the deficiencies that she saw in academia’s understanding of African ritual dance. By choosing this research area she was challenging both the traditional areas of academic focus that privileged majority cultural groups or viewpoints, as well as the effectiveness of established theoretical approaches to studying ritual.

The place where Dunham decided to conduct her research was Haiti. Though Redfield and Herskovits didn’t believe that African traditions in the Caribbean had remained unchanged, they did agree that Dunham’s best chances for understanding African traditions would come from this area.<sup>29</sup> Much of Dunham’s work was informed by Herskovits’ extensive work in Caribbean countries, including Haiti. Dunham travelled to Brazil, Cuba, Trinidad, Martinique and Jamaica in addition to her primary research area. The entirety of what Dunham accomplished is far too

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<sup>28</sup> Ronald Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 173.

<sup>29</sup> Dunham’s decision to conduct research in Afro-Caribbean locations stemmed from her belief in Redfield’s theory of acculturation which claims in part that because of the impact of colonization on African countries, studies of African traditions were best conducted in countries like Haiti that had maintained more of their indigenous traditions.

expansive to include in this project,<sup>30</sup> however most relevant to my research is her field work in Haiti, her accomplishments as the founder and artistic director of the Katherine Dunham Dance Company, and subsequently the creation of The Dunham Technique.

Haiti's unique history placed it in a good position to inform Dunham's research as it was a major port and transfer area during the Maafa.<sup>31</sup> It was the only country to successfully revolt against its enslavers, and therefore was thought to be a location where the traditions of Africa were more consciously upheld by previously enslaved citizens. Haiti's history of resistance may have been attractive for Dunham as there is an interesting parallel between the country's history of resistance and the history of resistance for African American women. Delores Williams writes, "since Reconstruction, the black civil rights struggle in America has been fueled by the bold resistance of African-American women."<sup>32</sup>

Like Haiti, resistance is also linked to the perception, both actual and perceived, of what it means to be a black woman. Williams sees modes of resistance for black women as more than social movements, but responses to the conditions that African Americans have sustained. She states "...the survival intelligence of the race creat[es] modes of resistance, sustenance and resurrection from despair."<sup>33</sup> Resistance and perception become key to black women's narrative and to Dunham's journey. African American women's prominent presence in African American society is not a new phenomenon. There is a well-documented history of their attention to the needs of the African American community and the actions that they have taken when those needs have not been met. Although not inherent to all African American women, those who identify

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<sup>30</sup>Dunham went on to earn both an undergraduate degree and master's degree in anthropology (though it would take her over ten years to complete the masters) and founded her own dance company in 1940. She went on to tour the world extensively with her dance company and teach at Southern Illinois University (she retired in 1982).

<sup>31</sup> The word "Maafa", derived from a Kiswahili word meaning disaster, terrible occurrence or great tragedy, is a term used to describe the African Holocaust or Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

African Code. *African Holocaust*. [http://www.africanholocaust.net/html\\_ah/holocaustspecial.htm](http://www.africanholocaust.net/html_ah/holocaustspecial.htm)

<sup>32</sup> Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness the Challenges of Womanist God-Talk*, 140.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

with the collective narrative of black women's "resistance and resurrection" historiography are more prone to take up the work of retrieving and transforming ritual to aide in the healing of their communities. The importance of writing about the women who exemplify this type of resistance, is an act of providing balance to the "savage narrative" that unfortunately still surrounds the rituals that they embrace. For womanists, having figures that embody these balancing roles "helps us to recognize what their lives and legacies continue to teach us about resistance, freedom and well-being,"<sup>34</sup> key components of the Sankofa Healing process and the principles of African dance in Haiti.

## 2.2 The Role of Dance (African Worldview)

In 1936, Katherine Dunham started her research in Haiti focused on the forms and functions of religious and cultural dances. Her journey to the African diaspora is where I assert she begins engaging in the first phase of the Sankofa Healing process. According to Dunham's personal accounts, she spent the early days of her research trip "driving into the hills at all hours of the night following the sounds of drums to observe or participate in dances and ceremonies" and asking locals to help her to locate religious ceremonies in the region.<sup>35</sup> She was accepted into many ceremonies because it was the belief of the local priesthood that anyone of African ancestry was a blood relative and therefore privy to learning and participating in the traditions of the Vodun (the primary religious tradition of the region).<sup>36</sup> After many months of participation in the rituals, Dunham felt strongly about both the ability of the dances to assist her community,

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<sup>34</sup> Renee K. Harrison, *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America*, 32.

<sup>35</sup> Gwen Mazer, "Katherine Dunham", in *Kaiso!*, 423.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 423.

*Vodoun* is a common spelling of the religious term, however other accepted scholarly spellings are *vodun*, *vaudou*, *vodou*, *vaudun*, *vaudoun* or *voodoo*. The spelling often depends on the region and sect of the religious practice. I will be using the spellings as they appear in the referenced texts.



and her personal connection to them and therefore was initiated into the Rada-Dahomey Vodun tradition.<sup>37</sup>

Neither the people nor the traditions of Africa are monolithic, but just as in the understanding of healing, there are widely shared principles in regards to the concept and importance of dance. African dance specialist Alphonse Tiérou defines African dance as more than an Afro-centric extension of the basic definition of dance (expressive movement to music). He adds that for dance to be part of the African tradition, it must also include two essential elements, freedom and awareness.<sup>38</sup> Dancer, choreographer and anthropologist Pearl Primus (another exemplar of the Sankofa Healing process) wrote of African dance that:

the subject matter of the dance is all inclusive of every activity between birth and death-the seed which trembles to be born-the first breath of life-the growth, the struggle for existence-the reaching beyond the every day [sic] into the realm of the soul-the glimpse of the Great Divine-the ecstasy and sorrow which is life, and then the back to the Earth. This is the dance!<sup>39</sup>

Primus's statement calls attention to the centrality and weight of dance and the power ascribed to its associated movement. Understanding the power of movement in the traditional African culture is vitally important because it is the catalyst most generally chosen to convey, transform and heal social conditions.<sup>40</sup> With this power comes inherent responsibility for the community dancers. The responsibility for African dancers lies in two aspects of their duties. The first is to be cognizant of the "ritual power" that accompanies the dances. This power from the African worldview is linked to the idea that dance connects the dancer with the earth and

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<sup>37</sup> The Rada-Dahomey is a Haitian sect of the Vodun religion.

<sup>38</sup> Tiérou, Alphonse, *Dooplé The Eternal Law of African Dance*, 11.

<sup>39</sup> Pearl Primus. "African Dance" in *African Dance An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*, 6.

<sup>40</sup> Because of the important role of dance in the society, dancers are chosen from childhood and trained by elder dancers in the community. The need to train in childhood stems from the role that dancers play in African communities. They are not only the physical keepers of traditions through dance, but they are also community leaders. Dancers are representatives of their communities and are often only known (outside of their immediate community) by their tribal or societal name. To be a dancer is to have honor and a huge responsibility. Ibid, 8.

therefore the dancer is able to tap into nature's power. The dancers must be well trained to respect nature because it is an essential element of the dance's effectiveness.

This is one of the areas of responsibility for the womanist community as well. The core principles call for womanists to focus their work on the liberation of all people, but especially African American women. The way in which they do this this work, especially in regard to social activism is by "...restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension."<sup>41</sup> Katherine Dunham retained this same focus and responsibility through embedded religious training (in her Dunham technique), mentorship and social activism. For example, one author writes that Dunham maintained a relationship with her drummers that "[gave] her technique a solid grounding in the spiritual life of those in the African diaspora."<sup>42</sup> Dunham goes on to describe that drummers are essential because they maintain the rhythmic integrity of the movement, but they also control spirits that might cause disturbances for performers.<sup>43</sup> Dunham reimported the importance of the connection between nature, spirit, dancers and drummers into the way she taught her technique.

The second responsibility of African dancers is to the dance itself. Rigorous training which starts early in life is designed to solidify their role in and commitment to the community. Through their dance training, they become the keepers of the history, culture and religious traditions of the society. The same correlation can be made for the women participating in the Sankofa Healing process. While the women are transforming the ritual dance, they are also transferring social standards of the cultures that the dances are derived from as well as aspects of their own. In this way they become keepers of history and culture for the diasporic community.

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<sup>41</sup> Layli Phillips as quoted by Arisika Razak, "Embodying Womanism Notes toward a Holistic and Liberating Pedagogy" in *Ain't I a Womanist Too? Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought*, 222.

<sup>42</sup> Joyce Aschenbrenner, "Dunham Technique Seminars," in *Kaiso!*, 483.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

Dance's ability to connect nature's power, the spirit realm, and community can be seen in Dunham's dance performances such as her performance piece *Shango*.<sup>44</sup> In this piece and choreography like it, Dunham highlighted the roles and interactions between the gods and people. Swiss anthropologist Alfred Métraux wrote about the unique way that Dunham was able to demonstrate and also provide detailed ethnographical descriptions about how she created a real connection between the gods and dancers through her performances. He notes that he "felt upon her the breath of the *loas* (spirits), and [she] was able, in her capacity of ethnographer, and dance specialist, to describe...the state of complete surrender in which the body and soul are ready to receive the god."<sup>45</sup> These "barefoot dances to the Vodun pantheon" and ethnographic accounts passed on the education she received about the dance to her dancers and to her viewing audiences.<sup>46</sup>

Along with the responsibilities associated with African dance is the understanding that there are different types of dance and that each of them are attributed to various roles in the society. African American Studies and African Dance professor Kariamum Welsh-Asante states that "African dance belongs to several families- the family of ritual and ceremony, the family of performance arts, the family of religion and cosmology and the family of art."<sup>47</sup> In order for African dance to be adapted for ritual use, it must belong to the category of dance that has been rooted in ritual practices. This knowledge, taught to the dancer in accordance with other training, facilitates the power that helps to heal the community. The focus on the power of African dance from this worldview is one of the primary reasons why it is sought out and used by women of

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<sup>44</sup>One of the ways that Katherine Dunham combined these elements was in her dances that featured African gods (Orishas). In this video she talks about the premise behind the choreography in *Shango*. Shango123.

"Katherine Dunham on "Shango". Online video clip. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ab6KWufcCUw>.

<sup>45</sup> Alfred Métraux, "Katherine Dunham an Appreciation", in *Kaiso!*, 386.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Kariamum Welsh-Asante, *Zimbabwe Dance Rhythmic Forces, Ancestral Voices-An Aesthetic Analysis*, x.

African descent to make communal connections and eventually to facilitate healing.

### 3 TRANSFORMATION: MIXING THE MEDICINE

#### 3.1 The Journey Back (Engaging the Vodun)

Dunham spent 18 months in Haiti studying the dances and religious traditions of the Vodun, and during that time was initiated into the Vodun tradition. Through this process she learned that the dances and the rituals of the Vodun were closely aligned. Having completed the retrieval of the African dances and associated ritual, Dunham's journey moved toward the next component of the second step of the healing process, the transformation of ritual to fit community needs. In Dunham's scholarly work, she came up with several key theories about how dance related to the religious and secular lives of Haitian people. The first point of Dunham's theory states that there must be a working definition of dance. She defined dance as a "rhythmic motion singly or in a group" for any of the following reasons; 1) play, 2) release and building of emotional and physical tension, 3) establishment of social cohesion or solidarity and/or 4) exhibition of skill.<sup>48</sup>

Dunham believed that the ritual dances of the Vodun fell under reasons 2 and/or 3 for their societies. She went on to develop a classification system for Haitian Vodun dances which helped her to determine how they would be used in her future technique and choreography. Haitian ritual dances have five categories according to Dunham:<sup>49</sup>

- 1) Their social significance in the community
- 2) Their material aspects (drums, clothing symbols, etc)

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<sup>48</sup> Katherine Dunham, "The Anthropological Approach to the Dance", in *Kaiso!*, 510.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, 513

- 3) Their form, both in choreographic development and in body emphasis
- 4) Their function, sociological and psychological and,
- 5) Their organization, from loose-knit carnival band to the highly organized Vodun ceremony

Dunham's observations of the categories of Haitian dance offers information about how she viewed its function and foreshadows the ways in which she would later use them. Through observing and categorizing the dances, Dunham uses primarily the form, function, and community (categories 1, 3 and 5) "structure" as a baseline for her choreography. Though Dunham's primary intent was to create a dance form, she incorporated African dances that had associated ritual and religious associations, thereby creating a ritually centered technique.

Specifically, the Vodun and religious dances that influenced (and were included in) Dunham's technique were the Damballa-a Vodun serpent god dance of the Vodun, Yanvalou (dance of humility and assurance)- a religious dance that honors Damballa, Zepaules- a dance of the Vodun done primarily for the gatekeeper god Legba, and Mahi(my-ee)- a complex rhythmic dance of the feet.<sup>50</sup> With the totality of what she had been taught and observed about African dance in mind, she created The Dunham Technique, using African-based movement as an essential element to inform her technique in both form and function.

Dunham's technique was in itself an effort to embrace dances of her ancestry and provide a form that could cater to the needs of her black dance community. Her desire to transform the traditions stems from her early experiences with classical dance forms and the "negro body."<sup>51</sup> She wanted to address how African Americans could express themselves fully in

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<sup>50</sup> Albirda Rose, "Dunham Technique Barre Work and Center Progressions", in *Kaiso!*, 493

<sup>51</sup> While teaching classical ballet, she began to get discouraged about the Negro body in classically structured styles. As a result, she started to think about the Negro body (and all bodies) in terms of patterns of rhythms, which she felt were "more differentiated on the basis of their rhythmic cycles than on the basis of their race or color." She did

their own dance forms. One example of how she did this was through productions like her 1952 performance piece *Negro Ballet*. This work (of which a video clip can be viewed in the notes) is rooted in a ritual story of good versus evil. The performers, as the narrator conveys, are incorporating both cultural and “ritual dances” in the choreography.<sup>52</sup>

Since Dunham wrote about how black bodies didn’t fit the classical ballet style, naming this ritually centered piece *Negro Ballet* was her way of creating a space for black bodies to express fully, and as a clear resistance to the classical ballet structure. According to Millicent Hodson, “it was her goal to take the knowledge of ‘primitive’ rhythms [through dance] and use it to change the quality of modern urban life. By way of doing so, she would preserve the culture of her ancestors; she would give new life to their spirits.”<sup>53</sup> Dunham used her technique and subsequent choreography as a mode of resistance to the systems of dance and society that she felt were oppressive to African Americans.

Having established from childhood a desire to bridge cultural gaps in the African American community, Dunham used movement (forms) that translated the ideas (functions) she wanted to convey both to her community and to the larger American society. The primary location for this work was the theater and films. She stated that “as in the indigenous [Vodun] community, certain specific movement patterns could be related to certain functions, so in the modern theater there would be a correlation between a dance movement and the function of that dance within the theater framework.”<sup>54</sup> Her attention to connecting her ritual understanding of African dance and her theatre productions proves that she intended this relationship to be

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believe however that “one of the survival mechanisms in black people has been a [specific] rhythmic pattern.” VeVe A. Clark, “Interview with Katherine Dunham”, in *Kaiso!*, 470.

<sup>52</sup> Dunham (1952) “Negro Ballet”. Includes a narration of the ritual story being conveyed. British Pathe. “Katherine Dunham (1952).” [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSTuO5E9\\_1g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iSTuO5E9_1g)

<sup>53</sup> Millicent Hodson, “How She Began her Beguine”, in *Kaiso!*, 495.

<sup>54</sup> Katherine Dunham, “The Anthropological Approach to the Dance”, in *Kaiso!* 513.

maintained. Dunham used the relationship between the functions of the dance and the potential impact to the community, specifically its “ritual” power, as a baseline for her choreographic messages.

The theatre and the arts as a site of social activism for African Americans did not start or end with Dunham. A recurring theme for African American activist art is a focus on what anthropologist E. Patrick Johnson calls performance ethnography. For Johnson, “performance ethnography, and narratives are deployed by [black artists] as they ground their blackness in a practice that embraces lived experiences, hard-won truths and redefining gestures.”<sup>55</sup> For African American women, they have defined this category in America as well as abroad through the work of performers like Josephine Baker, Mabel Mercer, Aida Smith and Adelaide Hall who traveled the transatlantic Vaudeville circuit during the Post WWI era.<sup>56</sup> Each of these women were unique in their performance aesthetic, however like Dunham, they used dance as a site of resistance and as a platform for social change.

Their performances were designed to show the power and beauty of the black performing body while showcasing the individual talent of the artists. These artists (to varying degrees) contrasted salacious depictions of the black body, and avoided the use of minstrel and black face performances. Most likely because of their focus on highlighting the talent of black performers, these shows were the most often reviewed in American Black press.<sup>57</sup> Womanist theorist Zakiya Adair writes that the performances of African American women “were the main drivers of the genre and their popularity illuminat[ed] the significance of vaudeville to the theatrical

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<sup>55</sup> *Understanding Blackness through Performance Contemporary Arts and the Representation of Identity*, edited by Anne Cremieux, Xavier Lemoine, and Jean-Paul Rocchi, 3.

<sup>56</sup> Zakiya R. Adair, “Transgressive (Re)presentations: Black Women, Vaudeville, and the politics of Performance in Early Transatlantic Theater”, in *Understanding Blackness Through Performance Contemporary Arts and the Representation of Identity*, edited by Anne Cremieux, Xavier Lemoine, and Jean-Paul Rocchi, 75.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 76.

constructions of identity.”<sup>58</sup> These new imports of alternative identity for black women’s bodies were in stark contrast to the dominating cultural narrative in each of these periods. The consistency of stereotyped black bodies continued to produce artists like these and Dunham who used the theatre and dance to influence the African American view of themselves, and others’ perceptions of them as well.

Grimes does not consider the theatre (or performances) as a site for (ritual) transformation, primarily because of the lack of a consistent community. He states that “ritually connected people are supposed to be engaged by a web, whereas playgoers are connected by a thread.”<sup>59</sup> Although I agree with his reasons for discouraging the identification of theatre performance as inherently ritualistic, in a case where theatre performances intentionally evoke ritual (participation or other ritual intent), it is no longer only a theatre performance. The focus shifts from the venue to the properties of the ritual. For performances that are rooted in African ritual dance, the ritual themes are played out and the “ritual actors” (dancers) transfer moral and religious standards to their audience (the African American community being the primary audience).<sup>60</sup>

Performers become the ritual actors, the audience the ritual community, and their communal connection the necessary “web.” The transformation of roles through ritual intent creates the ritual space. Additionally, as outlined previously, those of African descent have already established a real or perceived connection with either the African traditions displayed, the African American choreographer, or the African American community present. In this way, these performances go beyond the drama of the theater and into the African understanding of a

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid

<sup>59</sup> Ronald Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 297.

<sup>60</sup> Feiler, Bruce. “Osun-Osogbo.” *Sacred Journeys with Bruce Feiler*.  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/sacredjourneys/content/osun-osogbo/>.



ritual performance where all members of the community have a place in ritual. The audience (at least in part and on various levels) understands their connectedness. This shared identity is the connecting fiber by which a “web” already exists before the “spiders” (ritual actors and community members) arrive.

One example of the connection between the African American community and the African Americans that produce theatre productions can be seen in the work of Alvin Ailey, a student of Dunham. He is one of the most well-known artist/activists in the dance community and has influenced both secular and religious expressions of black dance. His work, patterned after some of Dunham’s technique, spoke specifically to the lives, struggles and triumphs of the African American community. His premiere dance “Revelations” is in its 50<sup>th</sup> year of uninterrupted performance is a contemporary example of how this genre continues to convey and change the understanding of the African American cultural experience. Like Dunham, and the transatlantic Vaudeville productions, Ailey created his company to present a more complex image of the black body that included the pain, pleasures, love and communal aspects of what he perceived as the black cultural experience.<sup>61</sup>

Though geared towards impacting the African American community, Katherine Dunham’s theatre work incorporated several cultures and their traditions, African, Haitian and American. Each of these cultures affected her journey (and my evaluation of her work as an example of the Sankofa Healing process) at distinct access points. The African and Haitian contexts are relevant to the foundation and formation of the dances, however how they are applied (shown, shared and received) is reliant on the place of termination- America. Therefore to understand some of the ways in which this process is undertaken by those who live in the

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<sup>61</sup> Thomas F. DeFranz, "Composite Bodies of Dance: The Repertory of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater." *Theatre Journal*, 659.

United States, the factors that affect them are relevant to the successful retrieval and adaptation of African ritual. Though there are several, one of the most prevalent is the view of black bodies in motion (embodiment). Religious studies scholar Anthony Pinn provides a framework for African American embodiment by stating that African Americans “are often defined by and reduced to popular perceptions of Black flesh” leading to the creation of a perception of a respectable or acceptable black body.<sup>62</sup> In his evaluation of Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* he states that African American literature is a place that “articulates the discomfort with flesh encouraged by social perceptions of black women.”<sup>63</sup>

For Dunham, embodiment was not only about the performance of her dances in light of the social view of her black body, but also about the reception of her scholarship because her approach to research included a physical emersion into her subject matter. She engaged in an *embodied empathetic scholarship* that subsequently influenced the creation of her technique and the direction of her dance company.<sup>64</sup> Dunham took this approach as a way to better understand the ritual practices of the Vodun dances, so that she could relay their non-verbal aspects from the vantage point of the originating tradition. In this way, she provided another layer of analysis for the academy.

Scholarship that attempts to accomplish this work is difficult because of the lack of attention on the relationship between the scholar’s body and the research and writing process. Embodiment theorist Susan Foster writes that, “Verbal discourse cannot speak *for* bodily

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<sup>62</sup> Pinn, Anthony B. *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought*, 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>64</sup> Robinson-Myers, Karli. The term *embodied empathetic scholarship* is taken from a paper presented at The American Academy of Religion, Body and Religion Group 2014 forum. The two paragraphs that follow are an adaptation of that presentation. *Embodied empathetic scholarship* involves using an abstract idea, originally in one medium and transferring it into another medium of expression. Dunham does this by transferring dance language into the written language of scholarship. *Embodied empathetic scholarship* involves using the body to better understand the subject matter and then relaying it again- from the scholar’s perspective. In this way, it provides another layer of analysis for the scholar and others viewing/reading the source information.

discourse, but must enter into ‘dialogue’ *with* that bodily discourse.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, embodied scholarship demands the “invention and implementation of theories and practices that are integral to (and move in tandem with) archival research and historical writing, while drawing upon a set of skills honed over time.”<sup>66</sup> Sam Gill brings attention to the dissonant relationship between scholar’s bodies and the scholarly process by noting that embodiment is a hard area for academics to grasp due to the way they are usually trained. Essentially, “[academic] bodies [are] disciplined from their earliest days of school to privilege the head part and to develop agnosia with respect to everything from the mouth down.”<sup>67</sup> These scholars are calling attention to the structures that exist that discourage the use of the body in academic pursuits. Part of Dunham’s work, and the work of theorists like Yvonne Daniel, are to bridge the connection between physical discourse (via embodied practices) and their written counterparts.

Several aspects of the Sankofa healing process are affected by historical views and uses of black bodies. Specific to this subject area is the work of Black Liberation scholar Anthony Pinn and scholar/artist/activist Audre Lorde who lead us to ask critical questions about the use of the body in scholarly pursuits and the nature of how different bodies are perceived. Lorde advises that the body must be included in conversations about the whole person and their experiences. From Lorde’s perspective, Dunham’s embodiment of ritual dances were paramount to establishing a contextual relationship to them. Professor of race and critical theory Rodrick Ferguson writes of Lorde’s work that “she was attempting to rehabilitate our senses of inner scrutiny... in order to more clearly define the stakes of progressive scholarship, art, and activism....establishing a will to connect, especially in those areas where certain connections

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<sup>65</sup> Foster, Susan Leigh. *Choreographing History*, 9.

<sup>66</sup> Rossen, Rebecca. *Dancing Jewish: Jewish Identity in American Modern and Postmodern Dance*, 13.

<sup>67</sup> Gill, Sam and cited in *Religious Studies, Theology, And the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain*. Edited by Cady, Linell Elizabeth, and Delwin Brown, 90.

were often prohibited.”<sup>68</sup> Lorde’s evaluation rings true for Dunham in light of the reception of her work initially by her university mentors, and the perception of black bodies in the larger American culture.

Linda Thomas gives further insight into the stakes of this healing process for African American women (womanist). In her evaluation, for African American women, it is not just about identity and the images that might facilitate black women’s views of themselves. “[Womanists] know that what our minds forget, our bodies remember.”<sup>69</sup> From the lens of Thomas’ interpretation, the relationship between the mind and body is paramount in this process as the body is central to our being. Both scholarship that speaks of embodiment and the use of the body in ritual is paramount for the womanist as “the history of the African American ordeal of pain and pleasure is inscribed in our bodies.”<sup>70</sup> For Black women specifically, the ideologies of the mind affect the body and vice versa.

Addressing the historical progression of African American women’s bodies in society (especially in motion) has to be accomplished for any of the stages of the Sankofa Healing process to be engaged and/or successfully implemented. A redefined relationship with moving black bodies, not colored by stereotypical presentations, must be accomplished for the work of the process to be performed. This is specifically true if an aversion to indigenous (black) dance expression exists. As Dunham states, “in the dances, the gods who possess you through rhythms and vibrations become your gods.”<sup>71</sup> I believe that sentiment can be extended to address prevailing roles and views of African American women, their bodies, and the dances of their

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<sup>68</sup> Roderick A Ferguson. "Of Sensual Matters: On Audre Lorde's 'Poetry is Not a Luxury' and 'Uses of the Erotic'." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 299.

<sup>69</sup> Linda E Thomas. "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm." *Cross Currents*, 492.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 492.

<sup>71</sup> Gwen Mazer, “Katherine Dunham”, in *Kaiso!* 423.

ancestry. For African American women hoping to engage in this healing process, the authority to view her body as worthwhile and permission to use it as she feels appropriate, must be reconciled. If it is not, pejorative views become the “gods that possess,” and create a hindrance to the healing processes application and effectiveness. Though Dunham didn’t address issues of black bodies in the ways that I describe them, in writing on why she created the Dunham technique (providing a dance form that supported the way African American bodies move), she did in fact address the view of black bodies in motion.

### **3.2 Dance and Ritual Relationship**

I have established that African dance (in the context of the African worldview) connects dancers with the community and the supernatural (either the earth, ancestors or gods), and that African dance hold some type of ritual power for these societies. Therefore there is a situational relationship between African dance and ritual. However, there a difference between ritual dance (created as part of a particular ritual activity or ceremony) and African dance (ritual or secular) that has been adapted for ritualized purposes. Neither secular dance, nor ritual dance that has not been abstracted in the context of its ritual intent, can be labeled authoritatively as ritual dance. However I argue that the dances can become ritualized when specific components of it are abstracted for their ritual aspects. From this perspective, the dance is being used to create new ritual. Dunham outlines the use of ritual themes in many of her writings, but they can also be seen in her work. For example, Katherine Dunham’s “Town Square” dance sequence in the 1948 film *Casbah*, is centered on a serpent theme. Dunham’s technique (and this dance sequence) is an adaptation of the Vodun dance Yanvalou that honors the serpent god of dance Damballa. For both the Yanvalou and the *Casbah* scene, there is an emphasis on serpentine body movements

and spinning (circular movements) of the dancers. In the film version, there are props and other markers to indicate the snake imagery (snake charmers with flutes and baskets etc).

Both the *Casbah* dance sequence and the Yanvalou (clips of both are included in the notes) show how Dunham veiled the use of ritual dance in her film choreography.<sup>72</sup> Even still, a clear thematic presence (serpent) can still be observed. Though my thesis is not focused on the direct connection of movement used in the dances that Dunham choreographed, I am arguing that aspects of the Vodun dances (movement patterns and themes) have been used by Dunham in her choreography. The absence of a direct connection (through Dunham's writings) between ritual dance and her film choreography is especially interesting in light of the time period that the film was produced. Dunham's veiled use of ritual provides another example of how she imported ritual and resisted prevailing constructions of black bodies and African tradition.

Part of the traditional understanding of the dance is that it is intended to allow for the individual to express their own personal expression in tandem with the ritual intent of the dance.<sup>73</sup> In this way, Dunham invokes the theme of ritual dance in her choreography. I further assert that the freedom to create ritual dance is essential for the African American who has likely been removed from other African based community ritual. Thomas calls this type of process a "womanist anthropology of survival and liberation"<sup>74</sup> and goes on to explain that this is needed to allow womanists to "create something new that makes sense for [womanists who] are living in

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<sup>72</sup> The dance sequences can be seen here. Hall, Daniel. "Katherine Dunham and Her Company Town Square Dance Sequence." [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJVWEY\\_UqU0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJVWEY_UqU0). Yanvalou dance as performed by Dr. Elizabeth Chin of the University of Florida. UFLibraries. "Dr. Elizabeth Chin Demonstrating the Yanvalou dance of Vodou." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CtRu-Amt8>

<sup>73</sup> Sounds True. "African Healing Dance with Wyoma." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkLoDhSrVKc>. Wyoma teaches about personal expression in African Healing Dance.

<sup>74</sup> Linda E. Thomas. "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm." *Cross Currents* 497.

complex gender, racial and class configurations.”<sup>75</sup> The power to adapt ritual dance in itself creates another point of connection between the African American community and their ancestral roots.

So what elements transform African dance into ritual dance? According to practitioners of Vodun, in order to access the ritual aspects of dance, there must be an in-depth understanding of the dances (to include the appropriate training required to perform them). This is the only way to access the “healing” that the rituals invoke. Pearl Primus adds that “to understand African dance adequately, one should have some knowledge of African religions.”<sup>76</sup> For Primus, there must be some understanding, however she does not propose that extensive religious dance training has to be undertaken by the entire ritual community, but is essential for the ritual actors (dancers). It is clear that while she feels African dance may have useful applications without any knowledge of African religion, they cannot be expected to perform in the same way as ritualized dance practices (which include the appropriate context).

In “Black Religion the African Model,” theorist Maulana Karenga outlines general themes of African religion. The fourth aspect is most relevant to my thesis as it covers the concept of immortality through upholding traditions and through the completion of good works.<sup>77</sup> Participation (at various levels) in religious traditions is part of the spiritual responsibility of all people in the African context according to Karenga. Therefore one does not have to be a practitioner (ritual actor, choreographer or dancer) to have a place in ritual. Their place in the ritual comes from their ancestral or communal connection to it. As with most forms of ritual, African ritual dance, especially dance that has been adapted, has a layered meaning for

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 491.

<sup>76</sup> Pearl Primus. “African Dance” in *African Dance An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*, 10.

<sup>77</sup> Maulana Karenga, “Black Religion in the African Model”, in *Down by the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion*, 43.

those participating in it. In order to recognize its uses, a look into African indigenous religion must be considered.

Theorist Yvonne Daniel,<sup>78</sup> whose work focuses on Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba and Bahian (Brazilian) Candomblé, outlines her understanding of the relationship between African dance and African ritual by recounting her early interactions with it. She notes that “[she] recognized and understood a great deal about Haitian religion just from the process of learning the dances. [She] knew that the dance ritual’s ultimate purpose was to bring transformation of the believing community, such that particular spirits would appear in the bodies of ritual believers.”<sup>79</sup> In her evaluation, the believing community encompasses all those that participate in ritual. Their presence alone facilitates some level of healing. Not only is there a relationship between African dance and African ritual, but it is interrelated with the presence and needs of the community. Their presence helps to manifest the spirits by which healing was (and is) transmitted. For Daniel, Dunham and others participating in this process, the community must show up. They are an essential element to the transmission of healing but also to the transformation and manifestation of it.

Ritual or ritualized dance, using Karenga and others’ evaluation of it, is part of the realm of African religious expression but the extent to which it is defined as “religious” is arguable. The question of the extent to which a celebration, ritual or tradition can be defined as religious has been asked of other pseudo-religious celebrations and traditions such as adapted African ritual dance. One example is the Catholic religious celebration of Saint Patrick’s Day. Saint

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<sup>78</sup> Daniel’s work explains the way in which dance is encoded through movement but also in the ways in which talk about and interpret movement. Her book looks specifically at Haitian and other Caribbean forms of dance and outlines thirty years of anthropological and religious studies research. She is also a former student of Katherine Dunham.

<sup>79</sup> Yvonne Daniel. *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba and Brazilian Candomblé*, 12.



Patrick is a patron saint of Ireland who was kidnapped from Britain at 16 and enslaved in Ireland. After escaping to freedom, he returned later to convert the Irish to Christianity.<sup>80</sup> Though the celebration of Saint Patrick started in Ireland, there are groups of people that chose to participate in the ritual, some religiously and others just for the enjoyment of the festive atmosphere. Though the celebrations are rooted in a religious tradition, to what extent can a scholar call it religious? This identification is largely left to the individual practitioner's determination.

An example of this in an African tradition is the Osun pilgrimage in the city of Osogbo, Nigeria.<sup>81</sup> As one Osun pilgrim put it, "it's like St. Patrick's Day, you don't have to be Catholic to participate."<sup>82</sup> The pilgrimage is part of the heritage and mythology of the people of Osogbo. Some chose to call it religious, or part of the Vodun tradition, however others consider it a cultural ceremony. I add that though Osun pilgrims or St. Patrick's Day participants may not be doing so as a part of religious ritual, it does not mean that it has no impact on their religious understandings. At a minimum, once a year (or whenever they participate) they recall their relationship to Osun or St. Patrick and therefore engage in some interaction with the initial religious intent of these ceremonies.

As Karenga outlined, religious understandings should be considered in viewing African dance, but it also must be considered when assessing the effectiveness of transferring the ritual aspects of the dance to the African American community. The historical and contemporary role

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<sup>80</sup> The Editors of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/858491/Saint-Patrick's-Day>. Saint Patrick's Day, feast day (March 17). By the time of St. Patrick's death on March 17, 461, he had established monasteries, churches, and schools. Many legends grew up around him—for example, that he drove the snakes out of Ireland and used the shamrock to explain the Trinity. Ireland came to celebrate his day with religious services and feasts. Emigrants are responsible for bringing the celebration to the United States and for the secular celebration of Irish culture during the festival time.

<sup>81</sup> Feiler, Bruce. "Osun-Osogbo." *Sacred Journeys with Bruce Feiler*. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/sacredjourneys/content/osun-osogbo/>. The pilgrimage to the sacred groves of the Yoruba goddess Osun is a part of the creation mythology of Osogbo, Nigeria. The tradition states that the city was created with the protection of the goddess Osun as long as the ruling family leads a yearly homage ceremony and protects her sacred forest and river. The annual pilgrimage occurs over 12 days in August with over 100,000 participants.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

of Christianity in African American society plays a large role in either promoting or prohibiting communal interactions with African dance and any African ritual that accompanies it. The view of black women as keepers of religious tradition and as healers is one of the ways that African traditions may be embraced by the larger African American community despite it not having a focus on Judeo-Christian principles. Specifically, the womanist concept of “mothering,” or “other mothering” has a tremendous impact on the influence that African American women have on their communities.

Family systems in pre-colonial West Africa were just as diverse as the languages and various indigenous religious presence, however whether they had a matrilineal or patrilineal orientation, “the mother had a prominent role” as she was viewed as the “soul life of the family and lineage.”<sup>83</sup> This dynamic continued in America as elder enslaved women, when they became too old to work, were tasked with caring for the children of the plantation. This structure expands to “other mothers” after slavery as working mothers formed what Patricia Hill Collins defined as “woman-centered networks of community based childcare.”<sup>84</sup> As a result of African American’s connection to the mothers and other-mothers in their communities, the work of women like Dunham may more readily be accepted. In the womanist analysis, “mothering functions to fashion networks of women who significantly contribute in the creation of black identities and communities.”<sup>85</sup> In my analysis, the ideology that mother figures should be respected as counselors and keepers of family lineages greatly increases the successful import of ritual dance for African American woman. In essence I am positing that African American women are

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<sup>83</sup> Renee K. Harrison, *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America*, 34. Ibid, 35.

<sup>84</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, as cited in *Black Womanist Leadership Tracing the Motherline*, edited by Toni C. King and S. Alease Ferguson, 217.

<sup>85</sup> Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *African American Women Tapping Power and Spiritual Wellness*, 35.

uniquely empowered to be transporters of African ritual dance due to the roles that have developed for them in the American context.

Counter to the acceptance of mother figures, which may have helped Dunham transfer ritual into society, is the aversion to African based ideology. Renee Harrison, building upon womanist scholar Dianne Stewart's work on religio-cultural oppression, describes the American (both black and white) resistance to things related to Africa, as a condition she calls "anti-Africanness." She clarifies that "anti-Africanness is cultural annihilation, self and spiritual debasement, and fear of most or all things African, particularly indigenous religions, identities (ethnicities), and ways of life."<sup>86</sup> Harrison goes on to outline the ways in which there is not a singular point of contact for this condition. Along with its presence among Americans, she asserts that it is also deeply entrenched in scholarship (the "mind of the master"),<sup>87</sup> in missionary efforts, in the colonized mind of the modern African, and in western religious instruction.<sup>88</sup> Harrison's theory points to some of the reasons why some members of Dunham's academic and racial/ethnic communities may have rejected her work. According to the ideas I have presented about the entrenched sentiments of Anti-Africanness, especially in Dunham's era, some people may have chosen not participate, or perhaps even repulsed by the African themes in her choreography.

For the descendants of enslaved Africans, anti-African sentiment is not an abstract concept, it serves as an explanation of conditions, stereotypes and longstanding policies. However, African American women have often offered a responded to these conditions. In her book *Witnessing and Testifying Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights*, religious studies scholar Rosetta Ross highlights seven African American women who created activist movements

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<sup>86</sup> Renee K. Harrison, *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America*, 114.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 114-144.

in their efforts to “overcome ongoing stresses in Black life deriving from racism and attempting to alter society’s formal and conventional sources of distress.”<sup>89</sup> Ross’ book focuses on the activist work of Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Ella Baker, Septima Poinsette Clark, Fannie Lou Hamer, Victoria Way DeLee, and Clara Muhammad, providing examples of some of the responses of African American women toward anti-African sentiment (in the form of racism).<sup>90</sup>

Renee Harrison notes that resistance and strategic action toward the anti-African sentiment began with enslaved African women who were still strong enough to share of their various traditions among themselves (Vodun, Islam and other indigenous religion). This sharing of information, especially healing ritual, medicines and moral understandings was a part of the enslaved African (American) woman’s life. This shared information was pulled from the only knowledge that they had access to, their “African past [which] afforded them a rich reservoir for accessing and making use of elements and energies around them for healing and protection.”<sup>91</sup>

Over the generations that followed, they continued to pass down central ideologies to their

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<sup>89</sup> Rosetta Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying Black Women, Religion, and Civil Right*, 226.

<sup>90</sup> Sojourner Truth (also known as Isabella Baumfree and Isabella Van Wagner) - an “abolitionist and an advocate for women’s rights” during the antebellum period. Ibid, 16.

Nannie Helen Burroughs-a key member of the National Baptist Convention (NBC) and speaker in the early 1900s whose work focused on relocation assistance for black families and “practicing racial uplift and...religious social responsibility, attending especially to Black women and girls.” Ibid, 23.

Ella Josephine Baker- helped to found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) during the Civil Right era. She is known as a “mother and a midwife of the Civil Rights Movement.” Ibid, 32.

Septima Poinsette Clark- Key in advocating for voter rights and promoting literacy in the African American community. She is viewed as a nineteenth century activist woman who “related religious piety to racial uplift and social responsibility practices.” Ibid, 52.

Fannie Lou Hamer- Key figure in the voting rights movement, literacy movement and SNCC organization. When describing her contribution to the African American community, she stated that “The Lord helped me to help my people.” Ibid, 91.

Victoria Way DeLee- Facilitated boycotts and protests in support of the desegregation of schools and African and Native American rights. Worked to “improve life for African Americans, in particular and poor people, generally in Dorchester County, SC.” Ibid, 117.

Clara Muhammad- Co-founder of the Nation of Islam and wife of leader Elijah Muhammad. Was key in education movements for African Americans and is credited with “influencing a generation of African Americans taking up the posture of race pride that became integral to the Civil Rights movement.” Ibid, 141.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, 183.

children which included how to absorb, transform, and utilize any (and all) of the resources they had available.<sup>92</sup> The investigation of modes of resistance, which incorporated African traditions can be seen in the arguments of W.E.B DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston, and sociologist Donald Matthews, and others.<sup>93</sup>

The use of African dance was one of the aspects of sharing that was present during enslavement, and continues to provide the same type of healing for this generation of African American women. Harrison writes that dance, paired with music and drumming, “had a way of tapping into the black woman’s inner wounds, consoling their broken hearts, and providing them hope and imagination to manifest a better tomorrow.”<sup>94</sup> These women may have been the first examples of a womanist community as they came together to pull their resources to collectively heal and protect themselves. This is not just an important aspect for me to note as an example of resistance and survival, but also as an example of how the practice and transmission of African dance links the current womanist community to the community of women that were the progenitors of ritual transformation in the Americas. As Thomas notes, the “use of our foremother’s rituals [allows us to]...reconstruct knowledge for an enhanced and liberating quality of life for black women today.”<sup>95</sup> African American women who know both the history and application of the “healing tools” of their ancestors, move the concept of healing from an abstract means of genealogical/ancestral identification into a tangible physical realm. They

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<sup>92</sup> Renee K. Harrison, *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America*, 148.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, 197. According to Harrison, W.E.B. Dubois attributed the sounds and rhythms of Negro spirituals (and other enslaved forms of expression) to indigenous African rhythms that they retained from Africa. Zora Neale Hurston wrote that the rhythms and rituals of the sanctified black church were derived from West African sounds and ceremonies. Donald Matthews theorized that the polyrhythms of enslaved Africans can be seen in African American artistic expressions through the evaluation of the nuances of thought and context.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 197.

<sup>95</sup> Linda E Thomas. "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm." *Cross Currents*, 491.

therefore create space for new liberation tools, like those employed to transform African ritual dance, to be used.

## 4 HEALING THE PEOPLE: APPLICATION OF THE PROCESS

### 4.1 Transmutation: Ritual Dance to Communal Healing

The founding of her company and the creation of her technique show that Dunham indeed went back to the traditions of her heritage (Sankofa) and reinterpreted them for her own use. However, I am also arguing that Dunham completed the final step of the Sankofa Healing process by importing transformed ritual into her community. I have already outlined several ways I believe that she attempted to accomplish this; however, most relevant to this effort was her import of African ritual dance in 1940s Hollywood films. Because of her explicit effort to show African based dance as a “legitimate” dance form, and her attention to the problems of the African American community, Dunham has been credited with helping “prepare the way for an increasing use of black dance, dancers, and choreographers in Hollywood films.”<sup>96</sup> The presentations of the black body and/or African forms of expression as savage were highly prevalent during Dunham’s time as discussed, and her attempts to address this can be seen in her productions. Two of the shows that focused on the social issues of her era were *Tropic Death*, about a fugitive running from a lynch mob, and *Negro Songs of Protest*, a collective work about the injustices of violence which included a piece about the Scottsboro Boys.<sup>97</sup>

Dunham’s responses to the community expanded beyond those involved in dance and academia. She was also well known as being a social activist, using her fame where she could to promote the rights of persons of African descent. Dunham’s focus on communal healing through

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<sup>96</sup> Roy Thomas, “Focal Rites New Dance Dominions”, in *Kaiso!*, 535

<sup>97</sup> Susan Manning, “Watching Dunham Dances, 1937-1945”, in *Kaiso!*. 258.

social change can be seen in her refusal to play in segregated Southern venues,<sup>98</sup> her demand for tickets in Paris for Africans who had been denied entry into her show, and her later hunger strikes in protest of the U.S. treatment of Haitian refugees. Dunham also created community outreach projects (after retiring from her dance company) where she taught The Dunham Technique to underprivileged youth in East St. Louis in an effort to keep them off of the streets.<sup>99</sup>

Dunham used ritual dances in the theatre and films; however, she didn't believe that the traditions of the Haitian Vodun (or African ritual dance) were a cure for all societal problems, or that African based societies were perfect ones. In fact she points out how some of the traditions were no longer working, or in some cases even destructive to the people inside of them. She notes that for some Haitians in the Vodun, "the African gods have turned into schizophrenic superstition; for others the strain of reconciliation between these gods and Catholicism creates deep conflict; [and] for many others the anxieties of the color-caste system are psychologically insupportable."<sup>100</sup> She did note that at a minimum the traditions continued to provide cohesiveness for the members of the society that engaged in them.<sup>101</sup> This cohesiveness was a part of Dunham's intent for her productions and dance company. Similar to the ways in which she was taught the traditional dances, she aspired to teach her company members dance movements alongside philosophy, tropical medicine, anthropology and the connections of the

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<sup>98</sup> Dunham talks at Jacobs Pillow Dance event about 1940s racism and how she dealt with a segregated audience. She refused to appear after making an announcement to the audience. Jacob's Pillow Dance: PillowTV. "Katherine Dunham on Overcoming 1940s Racism: Jacob's Pillow Dance." [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R\\_h0PBtv5-c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_h0PBtv5-c)

<sup>99</sup> Aimee Glocke, "Preserving Katherine Dunham's Legacy: A New Call to Action", in *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 112.

Dunham calls her East St. Louis project the greatest accomplishment of her life. Visionaryproject. "Katherine Dunham: My Greatest Achievement." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fmji4y3kcB4>

<sup>100</sup> Katherine Dunham, "Notes on the Dance", in *Kaiso!*, 517

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 517.

dances with the Vodun.<sup>102</sup>

#### 4.2 Ritual (Healing) Dance: Intention, Effect and Function

I have outlined the portions of Dunham's journey that correlate to the phases of the Sankofa Healing process, but her actions don't explicitly explain how the process can affect the community. Religious studies scholar and ritual theorist Ronald Grimes explains that to understand ritual we have to know what aspects of ritual we hope to investigate. According to Grimes, there are three primary aspects of ritual: intention, effect and function. In this section, I will look at each of these aspects in relation to the Sankofa Healing process.

Grimes notes that most ritual theorists speak of each aspect as distinct and separate, but he argues that while they are distinct they remain interrelated. The African dance theorists that we have explored understand that dance in Africa was a tool to engage and heal the community. Whether or not the community is physically participating in the dance, through their presence they are participating in the ritual intention of it. Though specific ritual elements may be hard to substantiate, Grimes believes that there are some concrete markers of ritual intention that can be observed, such as the recognition and use of a ritual symbol. Using these markers, I identify African dance (when adapted in the ways previously highlighted) as a ritual symbol.

Though there is not a vastly agreed upon theory that assists in the identification of a ritual element, Grimes' theory of ritual symbols points to several markers that help identify them.<sup>103</sup>

The markers that are most relevant to the identification of African dance as a ritual symbol are:

- 1) Rituals orchestrate, or choreograph, key cultural symbols.

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<sup>102</sup> Gwen Mazer, "Katherine Dunham", in *Kaiso!* 425.

<sup>103</sup> Ronald Grimes. "*The Craft of Ritual Studies.*" 320.



- 2) Symbolism can attach to any element of ritual, e.g., objects, actions, persons, words, places.
- 3) A symbol typically has many meanings, not all of which are active at any one time.
- 4) Symbolic meanings may be coherent or dissonant.
- 5) Symbolic meanings may be wordlike (dependent on semantic reference) or dance- and musiclike (dependent on kinesthetic or sonic patterning).
- 6) The emergence or decline of meanings is situational, determined partly by the intentions of the ritual participants and partly by social context.
- 7) Symbols can either point to or be identified [by] their affiliated meanings.

Symbols and their roles in ritual continue to be debated by ritual scholars. In my summation, the identification of whether or not something is a symbol can be determined by its significance to those using it. However, as Grimes notes, not everything used (even in clearly defined ritual practices) is a ritual symbol. He uses the scenario that water may be a symbol of a ritual, but not necessarily the bucket it is carried in.<sup>104</sup> Similarly, the costuming that Dunham used in her performances may have been reflective of the ritual dances that she learned, or could have been created to appeal to the audiences that came to her performances. Our previous example of the *Casbah* film is relevant here as Dunham's attire is not traditional; however, her movements can be connected to the Yanvalou serpent dance.<sup>105</sup>

In the context that I am investigating, dance is a ritual symbol for the entire community of dancers and participants not based solely on the use of the symbol, but based on the intent informing its use. In Katherine Dunham's case, she stated her intention through her writing and activism- in part to change the images of black bodies in motion in Hollywood films and other

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<sup>104</sup> Ronald Grimes. *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 319.

<sup>105</sup> Hall, Daniel. "Katherine Dunham and Her Company Town Square Dance Sequence." [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJVWEY\\_UqU0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJVWEY_UqU0)

facets of American society. However not all ritual activities present in the same way, especially when the ritual moves from the religious realm into the secular. Using the precepts of African ritual dance, the physical indicators of the symbolism in the dances, and the documented intentions of the adaptors (Dunham in this case), African dance is consistent with what Grimes describes as a ritual symbol. This is primarily because 1) its roots in African ritual and 2) the intention to create a change using the function (action) of the ritual, and 3) through the invocation of cultural identifiers/markers through the use of the ritual symbol.

The next aspect that Grimes addresses is the effect of ritual. He proposes that the dynamics of ritual suggest that they always work. The definition of “working” takes on two specific connotations for Grimes: “one is about fit [categorically]; the other, about achievement.”<sup>106</sup> African ritual dance fits into the framework of ritual from the African context and from the viewpoint of Grimes’ theory of ritual symbol. However, assessing whether or not a ritual goal has been (or can be) achieved means that the ritual must have defined goals.

Scholars of African dance and our exemplar expressed, or displayed their ritual intent and the goals associated with these intentions. However how does this relate to those that find themselves participating in aspects of ritual when there are no clear markers of the ritual significance (i.e. audience members at Dunham’s performance)? In evaluating the role of the participant audience’s relationship to ritual, I equate their activity with Grimes’ use of the ancient Greek concept of “*theoria*.” According to Grimes, *theoria* is “an act of deep receptivity... [it is] what happens when spectatorship is transformed into visual and emotional participation.”<sup>107</sup> Grimes theorizes that this is what happens during theatrical performances. There is no doubt that, as with many groups, audience members are participating emotionally at

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<sup>106</sup> Ronald Grimes. *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 297.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 166. *Theoria*, derived from the Greek word *Theorein*, means “to look at it” and relates to the contemplation of dramatic action.

differing levels, however they are all participating at some level, which means that they are certainly effected by the ritual action performed. Perhaps it has an energizing effect that correlates to the intended function of the ritual, or perhaps there are negative or indifferent effects. Even if it only ends in conversation, the effect of ritual is that it always does something, therefore “works.”

An additional effect of community encounters with ritual are that groups and subgroups may form around the ideologies that are presented during the ritual activity, often forming institutions that further transmit the ritual intentions.<sup>108</sup> One example of this institutionalized transmission of the cultural values of African ritual dance can be seen in movements like those of African dancer, scholar and healer Wyoma.<sup>109</sup> Wyoma’s “African Healing Dance” workshops have been inspired by dancers like Dunham and her travels through the diaspora. Like Dunham, Wyoma traveled back to West Africa to learn the ritual dances of her ancestry. Following her training, she formed the dance group *Damballa* and began to train people of all races and backgrounds about the healing aspects of African dance.<sup>110</sup> In my experience with Wyoma’s and dance training of this kind, the facilitators encourage participants to stay connected and share

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid, 279-281. Grimes explains in great detail how exposure to ritual activity, or the use of ritual activity “generates a widely recognized ideology coupled with ritualized behavior and a set of moral values, the result is an institution.” From these institutions, new people are exposed and a culture that imports the ideals of the institution is created.

<sup>109</sup> Wyoma is a dance performance artist and teacher. She is creator of the “African Healing Dance” and offers classes, workshops, and trainings in this holistic integrated model of movement and healing. She is a consultant and advisor in the arts and has traveled and taught extensively in east, west, and South Africa. For over 35 years, Wyoma has offered a huge creative canvas to explore the human and divine forces of nature through traditional African, Caribbean, and Brazilian dance. In addition to founding the Damballa Dance Company, she’s also co-founder of Ngoma Drum and Dance in Boston. Her current performances include solo and group work in dances of African diaspora and original creative works. Wyoma trained and collaborated with many inspiring masters including Baba Olatunji, Yvonne Daniel, Rosemarie Guiraud and Les Guivoires, Kobla Ladzepko and Dzidzorgbe Lawluvi. Wyoma received a BA degree in dance from Naropa University in Boulder, CO. in 1982. Her mission has been the restoration, preservation, and maintenance of these rich African traditions. Wyoma is a member of [Sini Sanuman](#) to help abolish FGM. Dance, Wyoma. *Wyoma Dance and Holistic Therapy*.

<http://www.wyomadance.com/about-wyoma.html>

<sup>110</sup> I was able to participate in Wyoma’s “African Healing Dance” intensive. During the weeklong session, the ritual aspects of African dance were explored as well as other religious rituals that have been syncretized to enhance Wyoma’s specific goals, a trait that remains consistent with the transformation of African dance and ritual for African American women.

their communal contacts as well. For example, members of Wyoma's dance group are facilitators of an annual remembrance ceremony in Hampton, Virginia (the location where enslavement began in the United States)<sup>111</sup> in which enslaved Africans that did not survive the middle passage journey are honored. Additionally, community members often house her Virginia participants in the historical Aberdeen Gardens neighborhood,<sup>112</sup> and provide tours and historical accounts of neighborhood's significance for the African American community. Wyoma states that African healing dance allows us to "move into healing and harmony with ourselves and our world."<sup>113</sup> For her, African dance is a part of a holistic understanding of the triangular relationship of the body, the spirit realm and the community. Like Dunham's efforts in St. Louis, and the example of enslaved women, Wyoma promotes communal healing through extending African American community connections in conjunction with dance training. In this way they also preserve the tenants of responsibility taught to African dancers during their training.

In Wyoma's example, the Sankofa Healing process impacts the communal relationship of the dancer and ritual leader (practitioner), but also effects the practitioner's relationship to the rituals. As they create practical ways to transmit these traditions in America, they also have to consider their own personal and financial needs. While African dance is a ritual symbol, money is a ritual object. Though the use of money is not abnormal in the ritual process, its purpose has changed for those participating in adapted rituals. In most accounts of Vodun practices, there is

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<sup>111</sup> Dalan, Chadra. "3rd Annual International Day of REMEMBRANCE- June 14, 2014 Buckroe Beach in Hampton, Virginia." <http://thesankofaprojects.blogspot.com/>

<sup>112</sup> Aberdeen Gardens was a New Deal planned community initiated by Hampton Institute (now Hampton University), designed specifically for the resettlement of African-American workers in Newport News and Hampton. In 1934, the Hampton Institute secured a \$245,000 federal grant to create the housing development. It was the only Resettlement Administration community for blacks in Virginia and only the second neighborhood in the nation for blacks financed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Subsistence Homestead Project. Taken from the Aberdeen Garden website. Aberdeen Gardens. Icontac. <http://aberdeengardens.org/>

<sup>113</sup> Sounds True. "African Healing Dance with Wyoma." <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkLoDhSrVKc>. In this video clip, Wyoma explains African dance's ability to create harmony.

often an exchange for services (monetary or otherwise) to healers from the community members seeking their services.<sup>114</sup> The exchange is thought to be both an act of faith in their abilities which helps facilitate healing, as well as a means of sustaining the healer's livelihood. In the case of African American women's adaptation of African dance, the teachings or theatre performance are part of the ritual "commodities that are bought, sold and traded,"<sup>115</sup> and since the primary medium of exchange is money in the West, it becomes part of the ritual process as a ritual object. Though the exchange of money is not entirely different from what happens in the exchange of ritual activities for African traditional religion, there are counterarguments to the use of money in exchange for ritual training.<sup>116</sup> For my exemplars, their relationship to the Western system of monetary exchange necessitates the use of money as the object of ritual exchange.<sup>117</sup>

The last aspect of ritual that Grimes discusses is the function of ritual for the groups that participate in, or are exposed to it. First, Grimes clarifies the relationship between the three aspects (intention, effect and function) by noting that "functions are harder to demonstrate than effects...neither functions nor effects necessarily match intentions."<sup>118</sup> This is a normal occurrence in ritual, so I am not arguing that the Sankofa Healing process is consistent from

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<sup>114</sup> Healers in the Vodun tradition may be called by many names such as Babalao.

<sup>115</sup> Ronald Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 283.

<sup>116</sup> Karen E. Richman, "Peasants, Migrants and the Discovery of African Traditions: Ritual and Social Change in Lowland Haiti", *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 383, 387. Theorist Karen Richman in her research exploring the costs and social effects of women's initiation into the rural Léogane, called Ti Rivyè (Little River) Vodun tradition, states her concerns about the practice. She focuses on the Western adaptation of the ritual exchange and outlines the amount of money that it takes to be initiated into the Ti Rivyè tradition. In her summation, this is not a traditional stance but one that has been influenced by the West and its focus on promoting a one to one exchange of money for services. Richman is arguing to discontinue the use of monetary exchange in locations where the traditions are still practiced traditionally, not for adapted ritual activity.

<sup>117</sup> Though this is not an area that I can fully unpack, money as a ritual object is one of the areas in which the American context changes the relationship between the ritual object, the ritual facilitator, and the community. For instance, in the Osun pilgrimage example, all members of the community both knew about the ritual and had access to participation in it. In the case of Dunham (and other participants in the Sankofa Healing process), there is no constant and direct access between community members and ritual facilitators and therefore services are advertised and commoditized in an inherently capitalistic framework. In my evaluation, the use of money as a ritual object is less problematic than the limited access to training or exposure to the ritual due to cost restraints. Further exploration could unpack this issue further; however, money provides a concrete example of the presence and function of a ritual object as outlined by Grimes' theory.

<sup>118</sup> Ronald Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 301.

intention through function. I have presented the framework for the process itself, and throughout the remainder of the section, will highlight the associations that I noted between ritual intention, effect and function, and bring attention to how these associations impact those who engage in the healing process.

A key element impacting my evaluation of the functions of African ritual dance is what Grimes calls “ritual dynamics.”<sup>119</sup> Ritual dynamics include two components: change and power. Change always occurs in ritual and ritual both empowers and disempowers participants. Therefore, rituals are dynamic and synonymous with change (whether they “work” or not). Change is a function of ritual as they (rituals) not only ‘are,’ but they also ‘change’ and ‘do.’<sup>120</sup>

An example of the use of African dance to facilitate change can be seen in the activity of the Atlanta based dance and drumming group Giwayen Mata.<sup>121</sup> This group originally formed as a community response to help a group of African American Muslim women who wanted to learn African dance, however they were not able to find support for this effort from inside their faith community.<sup>122</sup> Giwayen Mata continues to teach African dance and African culture at universities, community events, and through a weekly African dance class.<sup>123</sup> Giwayen Mata is an example of the functional work of African dance. They are also an example of resistance for

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<sup>119</sup> Grimes created a “Ritual Dynamics” List in order to reference the type of dynamic change that occurs in ritual. It is intended to be a guide for the ritual scholar to locate the ways in which ritual can function in community. Ibid, 295.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 294.

<sup>121</sup> The term “Giwayen Mata” comes from the Hausa ethnic group of Nigeria and West Africa. It means “Elephant Women” and often refers to the leaders of women’s organizations. The group of dancers and drummers came together in Atlanta in 1993 and not only performs, but also teaches classes and workshops in drumming and African dance. They perform traditional dances as well as modern works inspired by the dances of Mali, the Ivory Coast, South Africa, Guinea, and others *PBA 30*. Giwayen Mata.

<http://archive.pba.org/programming/programs/thisisatlanta/2982/>

<sup>122</sup> According to the information on the PBS website, the Muslim women were not allowed to dance according to the tenants of their specific Muslim tradition. *PBA 30*. Giwayen Mata.

<http://archive.pba.org/programming/programs/thisisatlanta/2982/>

<sup>123</sup> A look at Giwayen Mata, Atlanta’s all-female African drum and dance troupe. This story was featured on “This is Atlanta with Alicia Steele,” a Telly Award-winning and Emmy-nominated magazine show on PBA, Atlanta’s PBS Station. *PBA 30*. Giwayen Mata. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K44usz3gJfg>

African American women participating in the Sankofa Healing process as they use drums (Djembe and Dundun) and drumming techniques that are traditionally reserved for male priests. For Sankofa Healing, the ritual process,<sup>124</sup> using the ritual symbol of African dance functions to create change. Though these functional changes cannot always be measured, I have established that they are always transformative.

The second dynamic of ritual function, power, can empower or disempower the ritual community.<sup>125</sup> The Sankofa Healing process empowers the community by providing a site of connection with lost or minimally known ancestry, strengthening community ties through these efforts, and creating a platform for social issues outside of traditional ritual activity (as seen through the work of Dunham, Dance and Giwayen Mata). The process disempowers the community through the use of inherent power structures, economics,<sup>126</sup> focus on the normative body,<sup>127</sup> and may produce a false sense of change.<sup>128</sup> Essentially, Grimes' ritual theory assists in illuminating how the invoked symbol of African ritual dance functions to facilitate change in the communities that participate in or witness it.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Dunham's work, though not identical to the African ritual dance that it stems from, retains connections to its African based roots. As with the people of the African continent and African descendants of the diaspora, the nuances of the connections are diverse and complex.

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<sup>124</sup> Grimes defines the ritual process as "interactions among the elements of a ritual" and functions as "interactions of a ritual with its environment." Ibid, 296.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid, 303.

<sup>126</sup> Who can afford to go back and retrieve the traditions (either through obtaining a teacher in the United States or going back to a site of traditional practice to learn)? Additionally, what community members can afford to participate in learned from those that retrieve the traditions? There is also a socio-economic aspect that questions what communities are informed about performances, trainings and African traditions in general.

<sup>127</sup> How do the disabled or non-normative bodies participate (this is confined to concepts of American society where the adapted rituals terminate)?

<sup>128</sup> Though there is some change with the initial enactment of the ritual (information), people may not be motivated to participate in sustained transformative action.

They are also understood and accepted on varying levels. However, viewed through the lens of the Sankofa Healing process, Dunham's work provides another example of the many strategies that can be executed to successfully navigate what womanist ethicist Katie Canon calls the "dance of redemption."<sup>129</sup> This "dance" involves identifying patterns of injustice and strategically planning to alter them for liberation.

Though I chose to distinguish the Sankofa Healing process from the womanist lenses that I explored throughout this project, the Sankofa Healing process could also be described as a womanist one. Womanist scholar Linda Thomas notes that womanist methodological processes "unearth the sources of the past in order to discover fragments to create a narrative for the present and future."<sup>130</sup> I consider this work an answer to her call for womanist scholars of religion to "advance a new epistemology of holistic survival and liberation, a more intentional understanding of reconstructed knowledge processes,"<sup>131</sup> which I have attempted to complete in my evaluation of Dunham and others' journeys.

An expanded version of this work could provide additional connections between womanist liberation strategies and the traditions of Africa. In addition, continuing research could look at the benefits of this ritual in the African American community using the theories of cultural studies, healing ritual or cultural memory theory. This work could also be used as an entry into how the African American church has been influenced by Dunham's work, via the influence of Alvin Ailey, in the area of praise dance. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of the process, there are a number of areas where this framework can be applied. The healing

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<sup>129</sup> Katie Canon, as cited in *Mining the Motherlode Methods in Womanist Ethics*, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, 83.

<sup>130</sup> Linda E Thomas. "Womanist Theology, Epistemology, and a New Anthropological Paradigm." *Cross Currents*, 491.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid*, 493.



aspects of the process could be investigated through focused case studies, and the process can be applied in the fields of African American studies, dance and dance therapy disciplines.

For Religious Studies scholars, especially womanists, an exploration of the use of dance and religion in the black church (praise and liturgical), as well as dance forms that have grown out of the black church (crumping and miming) can provide further insight into the ways that this process continues to extend to other religious and cultural communities. In addition, this type of research could attract a new generation of artists, dancers, and activists to the field who can either research exemplars of embodied scholarship or use embodiment to expand their own research. These examples have the potential to greatly expand the borders of the field. It is my intent that this research will fill in some of the gap that exists between the intersection of religion and dance especially in regard to African American culture.

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