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Moving Statements: Black Youth Civic Engagement in Dance

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Publication Date
2014

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
Moving Statements: Black Youth Civic Engagement in Dance

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Sakina N. Ibrahim

Thesis Committee:
Professor Jennifer Fisher, Chair
Associate Professor, Molly Lynch
Assistant Professor, Sheron Wray
Assistant Professor, Tiffany Willoughby-Herard

2014
DEDICATION

TO

My ancestors and the freedom fighters.

Thank you for the sacrifices you have made and the blood that was shed so that I could be here.

My mother Caroline Powell and father Khalid Ibrahim whose life experiences, challenges, and vision made me the woman I am.

My grandparents Mattie and Gene Rosemond who always supported me in all of my pursuits.

To my brother Khalid “Iby”, Aunt Nicki, Uncles Carl, Darryl, and Gary, and my extended family whose laughter and prayer have always helped me to sustain my faith.

“The so-called modern education, with all its defects, however, does others so much more good than it does the Negro, because it has been worked out in conformity to the needs of those who have enslaved and oppressed weaker peoples.”

-Carter G. Woodson

The Mis-Education of the Negro
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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Oshunbunmi Samuel who helped me to find my voice as an artist and educator and who introduced me to new pathways to navigate my way through my purpose. To the many young people I have worked with in Philadelphia whose passion, creativity, aggression, and disenfranchisement have sparked the vision and mission of this research. I am forever grateful to you all for challenging me and teaching me who I am through your eyes.

Thank you to all of my dance teachers and mentors that include are Laurice Jiggetts, Carol-Ann Broadway, Jodi Faulk, Jennifer Pollins, Kalpana Devi, Kim Bears-Bailey, Jennifer Johnson, and Zane Booker who always emphasized the importance of the creative process and having meaning to your choreography. Thank you to Donald McKayle, whose work and choreographic process has made me think about the journey and not just the destination.

I acknowledge my dance ancestors such as Dr. Pearl Primus, Dr. Katherine Dunham, and Dr. Barbara Ann Teer who began a journey searching for cultural roots, identity, power, and liberation through the medium of dance and theater. They paved the way of using dance as an agent of cultural awareness and social activism, the legacy they began continues to live in my work.

Thank you to those that I have interviewed such as Kariamu Welsh-Asante, Abisola Faison, Sekou Heru, Nina Flagg, Nani Agbeli and the Ewe people of the Kopeyia Village.

Thank you to Donna Faye Burchfield who urged me to pursue my masters and write my own history.

Thank you to my Masters of Fine Arts committee members Jennifer Fisher, Sheron Wray, Molly Lynch, and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard who have showed continuous support and guidance throughout this process.

Thank you and appreciation to my UCI cast and students in the LEAP Program at Croizer Middle School for their dedication, ideas, artistry, and contributions.
Thank you to the University of California Irvine, The Medici Scholarship, UCI Research Travel Grant, UCIRA, The COR Church, and the Mograbi family who helped fund my research in Ghana and my Civic Engagement Project.
Abstract of Thesis

Moving Statements:

Black Youth Mobilization Through Civic Engagement in Dance

By

Sakina N. Ibrahim

Masters of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine 2014

Professor Jennifer Fisher, Chair

This research is focused on using dances of the African diaspora towards building a dance education model as a tool of empowerment through knowledge for black youth. This cultural history of movement explores sociopolitical awareness and mobilization through research in Ghana and a Civic Engagement Project tested in Inglewood, CA. This research explores factors that contribute to the disenfranchisement of black youth, structures of racism that affect them, and how traditions, history, and power are embodied in the continuum of diaspora dances ranging from traditional African dance to Hip-hop. This research is supported by material from Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance (1996), Halifu Osumare’s The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop Power Moves (2007), Kariamu Welsh-Ashante African Dance (1996), and Tommy Defrantly’s Dancing Many Drums (2002).
Chapter 1

Introduction

This thesis research is focused on using dance to empower disenfranchised youth by creating a dance education model that will offer tools for learning cultural history, self-identity, and awareness of systematic structures of oppression. My research is motivated by my own experiences and challenges growing up in the nation’s twelfth most dangerous city: Springfield, Massachusetts. My introduction to the world of dance opened my eyes to life beyond the environment, circumstance, and socioeconomic issues my community was faced with. The arts opened to me infinite possibilities, discipline, and opportunities. My research is inspired by wanting to offer tools that will help to mobilize black youth by connecting them to their roots and developing skills in critical thinking, leadership, and social-political awareness.

My pre-professional training included ballet and modern dance, but there was something about Hip-hop and African dance that transformed me. There was a spirit carried in the movement that distinguished these forms from ballet and modern dance. African and Hip-hop dance helped me to feel connected to my identity and I was empowered by the embodied knowledge of black traditions. These traditions helped me mediate between my formal education in predominantly white institutions and the conditions of black communities highly affected by drugs and violence. Experience with both worlds contributed to the way I moved, spoke, and thought about everyday life. I often felt isolated in each environment while trying to understand and navigate my way through the differences and challenges found in each world. This knowledge and experience inspired me to create a project to develop a dance education model that would teach the embodied knowledge of African diaspora, cultural history, and
encourage personal expression. I planned to critically engage students from black communities by using Hip-hop culture to connect to African culture in order to develop awareness of Afrocentrism in terms of values and self-identity.

In order to create the outline and goals for this civic engagement project, I turned to the scholarship of Barbara Ann Teer, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Halifu Osumare, Thomas DeFrantz, Kariamu Welsh Asante, Patricia Hill Collins, and Cathy Cohen. I also used information gathered from personal interviews with dancers and educators as well as my experience as a dancer and educator. I developed a course outline that includes the values of traditional African dance and its connections to Hip-hop, the history of arts and empowerment, and awareness of institutionalized racist structures that disproportionately affect black youth. Using these ideas, themes, and discoveries I choreographed a concert work.

In order to create goals, objectives, and a philosophy of this civic engagement project, I needed to look at the experience and theories of African Americans who have already pointed to and recognized the importance of African roots and how black traditions and history can be found in dancing black bodies. Brenda Dixon Gottschild is a historian, performer, choreographer, and anti-racist cultural worker whose *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* supports me in identifying the presence of African roots and the contributions of Black traditions (described as 'soul') in art. I used this research to look specifically at how black traditions have been created and/or readapted in Western society. This process is vital in the process of identification with Western art forms that have primarily excluded and often appropriated African contributions and creative intelligence.

Dixon Gottschild expands on Robert Farris Thompson’s *An Aesthetic of the Cool*, which
uses the art history of African people to demonstrate cool (calm, settled, tranquility, ease) and its meaning in language and behavior in a variety of African societies. This gives me a deeper understanding of how and why the African Aesthetic came to exist and its strong relationship to African American dance. Dixon Gottschild also addresses issues of power and ownership in the contributions to art by members of the African diaspora. My students will learn dances from throughout the African Diaspora and identify similarities between them. We will use the concepts of the Africanist Aesthetic, which are Embracing the Conflict, Polycentrism/Polyrhythm, High-Affect Juxtaposition, Ephebism, and the Aesthetic of the Cool, in order to develop vocabulary that works to identify embodied commonalities within the dances we explore.¹

It is very important for me to be able to share the power and sacred ritual practice that dance has carried throughout history. Choreographer and dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz’s *Dancing Many Drums* offers a timeline of African dances and their adaptations in new environments. Dance was the only way that enslaved Africans could stay connected to their culture, since speaking traditional languages, playing the drums, and exchanging other forms of cultural connection and communication were prohibited in the African Slave forts and on plantations. DeFrantz explains how these traditions and expressions have been carried into communal spaces like black churches and communities where they continue to evolve. This history will connect my students to the idea that dance has had a larger purpose and value in our lives and that we can continue to use dance to explore how to employ spiritual release, ritual, and freedom and expression.

¹ Brenda Dixon Gottschild describes the African Aesthetic as follows: Embracing the conflict: coincidence of opposites, Polycentrism: deriving from multiple centers simultaneously, High affect juxtaposition: coexisting mood or movement, Ephebism: youthfulness, power, vitality, drive, attack and sharpness, and Aesthetic of the cool: an attitude presenting the self with clarity. Together these terms offer polarity to differentiating African based forms of expression from a European aesthetic (Gottschild 13-16).
I use choreographer and dance scholar Kariamu Welsh-Ashante's *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry* to explore what defines African dance and the concepts, philosophy, and ethnic differences found in traditional African dance. Welsh-Ashante explains African dance's purpose in offering the history, knowledge, and values of the community: "African dance traditions are expected to express moral values; their beauty and power lie in the expression of these values through movements" (21). My students and I questioned if and how dances in the United States offer the same purpose.

Also foundational to teaching African diaspora dances is knowing how language, music, and dance are connected manifestations of each other. African music is developed directly from spoken language. Ghanaian ethnomusicologist Kwabena Nketia explains there is an integral relationship between music and language: “Song makers often create their texts and tunes together, drawing on the verbal style and stock expression such as epithets and proverbs in their language” (Nketia 145). Welsh Asante confirms that African diaspora dance’s “relationship to music, thereby language, is what chiefly distinguishes it from any other art form” (12). This has given my research value in employing the idea that dance is a language, a process of communication, and not separate from its connection to the music. During my civic engagement project we explored the messages behind current day social dances and questioned what value they have in our lives. Other questions we explored include: what are the differences between dance in the United States and Africa? What informs dances created within African-American communities? How are the experiences and cultures of African-Americans and Africans similar?

In order to share African culture, traditions, and dance I decided that I would need to go directly to the source and travel to Africa. I choose to go to Ghana, West Africa because of its
major role in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Ghana holds the first known Slave Fort, Elmina
Castle, built in 1482. The Middle Passage is a largely forgotten and unspoken history that is
vital to the education of black children in order to be cognizant of the position of blackness in
society, how African dance and traditions were dispersed throughout the world and what value
they carried under the paradigm of Slavery.

Foundational to this research is the acknowledgment of the ancestors, whom I cannot
name, that traveled across the Atlantic Ocean under the horrific conditions of the Middle
Passage. I stood in the female slave dungeon in Elmina Slave Castle in August 2013, prayed,
and offered a libation in honor of their courage and strength. I now acknowledge the strength
in my own blood because of their fight and hope.

My connection to Ghana has little to do with tracing actual bloodlines and more to do
with finding cultural and historical connections to African American identity and traditions. I
will share the details of my personal experience in Ghana and how it contributed to the overall
goals of my project. S. E. Patterson’s Black Holocaust for Beginners (1995) and Orlando
Patterson’s Slavery and Social Death (1982) helped me to understand slavery not as a historical
event, but as a paradigm of relations, natal alienation, general dishonor, and gratuitous violence.
I was introduced to this theoretical framework taking an Afro-pessimism course with Frank
Wilderson. Wilderson helped me to gain an understanding of social death, which aided me in
drawing conclusions of how the history of slavery relates to present day institutionalized racism.

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2 The Middle passage (1518-mid 19th century) was the transporting of over 37 million enslaved Africans
to the New world under coercion and horrific conditions. Enslaved Africans were stripped of their
language and cultural practices, many died at sea committed suicide before arriving to the new world. My
visit to Elmina and Cape Coast Slave Castles in Ghana shared the details and systematic and relations
already established before even arriving in the New World.

3 A ritual of acknowledgement for one’s ancestors with invocation of chosen words while pouring liquid.
and the phenomenon of black social death. I understand social death as ever-present condition and conditioning of persons considered less than human. Blackness was constructed under the violence of slavery and black bodies were considered property (objects) without the ability to become subjects. The aftermath of slavery that exists structurally and culturally shows how black bodies remain without the position of subjectivity.

In order to find a method to teach cultural and black history, I decided to focus on Hip-hop. I discovered scholar and activist Halifu Osumare's research that explains Hip-hop’s global impact and connection with young people. She uses the term “connective marginalities” to point to the “global inequalities that work in tandem with the irresistible Africanist Aesthetic to construct the global lure of hip-hop” for youth participants (68). For Osumare, “connective marginalities” explain why youth in many locations connect with Hip-hop. The four realms of “connective marginalities” are: youthful rebellion, historical oppression, class, and culture. I used these realms with my civic engagement students to identify social, political, and aesthetic commonalities between African and African American youth. Using Hip-hop as a central link built my students’ interests in learning African dance and the cultural values that affect identity and community, as well as information on Africa’s colonization and similar issues of poverty, violence, education, unemployment, and prison. Because black bodies carry a history of their oppression and because African diaspora dances and traditions hold embodied knowledge and phonetic power (DeFrantz), I knew that Hip-hop would help my students to feel closer to African American history than they had before.

In order to give my students a critical perspective on issues they face in their communities, I drew on writings that discuss on social conditions that face black youth.

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4 Other Afro-pessimist scholars that influenced my understanding of Social Death include Saidiya Hartman, Hortense Spillers, and Jared Sexton.
Sociologist Patricia Hill Collin's *Black Power to Hip-hop* writes about race, class, and power, and defines color-blind racism and new representations of oppression that the Black community faces. This literature supports my goal in drawing on the history of political movements that address social issues in (but not exclusive to) the black community. I suggest that part of the history my students need to know are the concepts of Black nationalism which include unity and self-determination. Being able to point to nationalism’s ability to “guide everyday decision making and group mobilization” (Collins 76) is useful in aiding my research participants to think critically about what they are exposed to, how they are represented, and the decisions that affect them and the community at large. These themes and ideas that were explored in my lesson plans.4

Similar to Collins, political scientist and social activist Cathy Cohen highlights major social issues, such as dysfunctional education systems, inadequate housing conditions, unemployment, police brutality, and teen violence as circumstances that marginalize black youth. Cohen’s data on black youth representation under these socio-economic circumstances, collected under the *Black Youth Project*, provides a frame for being cognizant of “the failures of local and national politics [that] have been especially hard on Black youth… a group that should have benefited from the struggles of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements” (133). Cohen provides statistics and data that question the position of U.S politics in providing policies and resources that address the same issues that were at the core of black political movements initially. Explanations about structures such as the School-Prison-Pipeline and The Prison Industrial Complex help my students to address their feelings about violence and crime and affirm the

4 Black nationalism sought to acquire economic power and to infuse among blacks a sense of community and group feeling. [http://www.britannica.com](http://www.britannica.com)
importance education.

A part of my process in investigating Hip-hop history and culture was to choose definitions and dances under the Hip-hop umbrella that support my goals and objectives of embodying knowledge of black traditions. I have found it difficult to find a synthesized definition of Hip-hop dance in scholarship. My intention is to respect the statement of Hip-hop dance legend Mr. Wiggles:

> We in the Hip Hop community would like for authors outside the culture to stop using PIONEERS and ORIGINATORS for [their] information, and to stop writing books without giving proceeds back to the people who created these art forms and the community.

Since the recorded scholarship of Hip-hop is often not written by those who created it, I choose to define Hip-hop from the words spoken by some of its creators and participants. The “godfather of Hip-hop” and founder of the Zulu Nation, Afrika Bambaataa, is recognized by the Hip-hop community as the first to use the name Hip-hop to define this culture and trace it back to its African roots. In the 2002 documentary *The Freshest Kids*, Afrika Bambaataa names the five elements of Hip-hop culture: Deejaying, Bboyuing (dancing), Emceeing (rap), Graffiti (visual art), and Knowledge, Wisdom, and Understanding. For my research and teaching purposes, I have chosen to define Hip-hop dance based on interviews with dancers from the Hip-hop generation, information gathered from watching a series of documentaries on the origins and evolution of Hip-hop, and my experiences dancing and training with Hip-hop company Rennie Harris RHAW. I explain Hip-hop

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5 The Zulu Nation is a Hip-hop awareness organization founded by Afrika Bambaataa.
6 I have suspicions about the scholarship that has been written about Hip-hop from outsiders and non-practitioners of the culture. I find it problematic to cite and define Hip-hop under the terms academics not involved in Hip-hop culture and want to highlight contributors and their own definitions. I also recognized the use of the term Hip-hop as a part of popular culture and its association with commercialized rap music and rap dancing, dance studio classes, and dance crews.
7 Bakari Kitwana defines the Hip-hop generation as those whose birth years are from 1965-1984. Despite age, Kitwana includes the entire spectrum (sub groups within the generation) of Black youth that are socially and politically affected by post-segregation and global economics (Kitwana 4-7).
8 Rennie Harris RHAW is a Philadelphia based Hip-hop dance/training company founded by choreographer, dancer, and director Rennie Harris.
as a communal art form that evolved from disenfranchised communities of Black and Latino youth in the Bronx, NY, that has spread into an umbrella of expressions that include Breaking, Popping, Locking, Wacking, House and vernacular dances.

Sociologist Joseph Schloss investigates Hip-hop culture in *Foundation: B-boys and B-girls and Hip-Hop culture in New York*. Schloss breaks down the term Hip-hop into three concepts: visuals, sounds, and movements "that were practiced in Afro-Caribbean, African American, and Latino neighborhoods [...] This term also refers to the events at which these forms were practiced, the people who practiced them, their shared aesthetic, sensibility, and contemporary activities that maintain those traditions" (Schloss 4).

Both uses of the term Hip-hop, along with interviews, helped me to understand Hip-hop as a continuum of African traditions, rituals, and aesthetics that evolved from and are meant to serve the community spiritually, socially, and politically. Afrika Bambaataa adds to this definition by referring to Hip-hop as “the name of our creative intelligence.” Although the many dance styles under the Hip-hop umbrella have distinct differences in their foundation and execution, they all embody significant commonalities under the Africanist Aesthetic.

By exploring Hip-hop as a platform of empowerment, I hope my students and I are able to avoid being prisoners of mass media representations of images of hyper visible sexualization and violence as well as other negative representations and focus on the history of its evolution by learning elements of the foundation under the Hip-hop umbrella.

Based on my research and experience teaching and working with young people in Philadelphia, PA, Springfield, MA, and Inglewood, CA, I have found that there are major similarities and commonalities in the socio-economic experiences and dance aesthetics of disenfranchised youth living in and going to school in black communities. I recognize there are
other cultural and ethnic groups that are also disenfranchised and have contributed to Hip-hop culture. It is not my intention to negate the contributions or struggles of others, but my focus for this project is specifically on black youth and African derived traditions that exist in the community that I am a part of.

On this journey of investigating my roots by looking at history, observing and participating in Ghanaian dance culture, interviewing dance scholars and Hip-hop dancers, and reflecting on my past experiences teaching in underserved communities, I have grown to understand how valuable this information is for young people that may have had the same experiences as I did. These experiences include mis-education in black history, inferiority complexes, and a lack of self-confidence and pride. This research is about more than dance: it is about life and offering a vehicle for black youth to achieve a life beyond what they may see and know as well as a vocabulary to discuss their experiences. Most of the issues are not their fault. “They are bigger than just you and I,” I would tell them, “the first step in beating the system is to know that it exists.”

In order to share my research, I decided to facilitate a ten-week course at the Learning Enrichment After School Program/L.E.A.P located at Crozier Middle School in Inglewood, CA. The LEAP Civic Engagement project would contribute to the development of the dance education model included in this thesis. The students would learn how to recognize African roots and the continuum of black traditions found by embodying them, they would be introduced to traditional Ghanaian dance and Hip-hop history, develop awareness of social political issues and structures that support them, and explore the idea of dance being used as a form of mobilization.

A live thesis concert featured dance majors from the University of California, Irvine
students from the LEAP program were invited but unable to attend the performance. The choreography consisted of three sections: the first commented on my reflections of the Middle Passage and misconceptions and stereotypes about Africa shared by my students; and the second was choreographic representation of the social economic issues important to my students by using the realms of connective marginalities as well as the constant presence of violence even in the midst of creativity and expression. The third focused on ideas around Afrocentrism and connections to traditional African culture, its influence in the continuum of black creative genius found in performance. This section states how even in the midst of social death we still survive, we still create, and our dance tells this story. The bow was a restaging of the traditional Ghanaian dance Bawa.

My use of literature, ethnographic and participatory research, civic engagement, and choreographic process have all contributed to my ultimate goal of using Hip-hop to activate the power of disenfranchised youth, in order to raise awareness regarding socio-economic issues, cultural identity, and the potential of Hip-hop culture to produce social action. Throughout this paper I share many inspirational quotes that have given me understanding and encouraged me during the process to continue to reach back and serve as a bridge in a larger purpose of moving forward.
Chapter 2

Going to Ghana

In the process of investigating the current social political conditions affecting the lives of black youth in the United States, I was led to learn more about the historical foundation of slavery and explore the traditions and knowledge in black bodies throughout the African diaspora. I traveled to Ghana to explore African culture, values, and history and how it might relate to diasporic youth and dances. I participated, observed, and investigated these questions and ideas with my own body.

Ghana is located in West Africa and has a population of 25 million people. English is the official language and there are over 36 languages throughout the country including Akan, Ga, Twi Hausa, and Ewe. The majority of my time was spent in the Volta Region in the village of Kopeyia among Ewe speaking people. At the Dagbe Cultural Arts Center, I took drumming and dance lessons, basket weaving, visited the local school, facilitating interviews and visiting neighboring villages to participate in other cultural events.

My journey to Ghana was one that I will never forget; the experience has transformed my understanding of “the social and psychological impact of the middle passage...and awareness of the black experience of survival and creativity, resistance, and struggle” (Anderson 164). Prior to my trip I was faced with anxiety about going to Africa and confronting the complexities of poverty and violence that co-exist with the richness in life and culture. I spent my days wondering if walking the grounds, smelling the air, hearing the sounds, and dancing the dance of my ancestors would change me. If
it did, would I be able to transfer this knowledge and experience into the lives of the students that I aspire to work with?

Africa was full of rhythm, hard work, and energy; dance was an everyday part of life. I woke up to the sounds of the morning worship drums at 5 a.m. I took dance and drumming lessons each day, spoke and played with the children, bartered in the market, and experienced the simplicity of life in the village. The children in the village were constantly engaging and participating in the traditional dances at a daily ceremony called *Agbaja*. Jackson, a staff member at the arts center, told me “[Ghanaians] do this for the children, so they can know the dances too, so they get information, and so we can celebrate.” I noticed how closely the children watched and learned by participating; their engagement allows them to have a sense of knowledge and become integrated into the community’s worldview.

African dance portrays the beliefs and values systems of its people. African dance traditions are expected to express moral values; their beauty and power lie in the expression of these values through movement (Welsh Asante 21).

When I danced well, a local would put a piece of fabric over me and they would call me “Enyo.” The program director and instructor Nani Agbeli, says it means that I dance like a true Ghanaian. This made me feel proud, welcomed, and connected to my roots. I learned from the men, women, and children in the village that dance represents the daily lives, prayers, and order of the community, and most of all the dances display unity, collective identity and collective responsibility. I noted that I wanted to include this in creating the classroom culture back in the U.S.

African dance shares the history of people, and it tells stories. A dance can tell you about famine, war, celebration, or pride: “African dance can provide insight into gender roles and relationships, religions, and belief systems, ceremonies, age group
relationships and expectations” (22). These values became vital to my understanding the role of dance and its greater meaning and purpose.

In each dance class or while visiting other villages I saw connections between traditional Ghanaian dance and dances from my home such as dances in the Pentecostal church, also known as ‘shouting’, and Hip-hop. Specifically, I saw steps similar to those in breaking, social dances, house, and tap. Identifying with these dances affirmed my goal in tracing the origins of Hip-hop back to Africa. I found similarities in the footwork of Adzogbo to the footwork of house dance, which is a freestyle dance consisting of vernacular steps that include foot taps, hops, and complex rhythmic patterns. Katrina Hazzard-Donald explains that these dances “exhibit angularity, asymmetry, polyrhythmic sensitivity, derision themes, segmentation and delineation of body parts, earth centeredness and percussive performance” (Perkins 223). I could use Adzogbo and House as examples to point to the visual and embodied connections that link dances performed both in Hip-hop culture and in traditional African dances:

African-American dance serves some of the same purposes as traditional dances in Western and Central African cultures: on both continents black dance is a source of energy, joy, and inspiration; a spiritual antidote to oppression, and a way to lighten work, teach social values, and strengthen institutions (Malone 24).

These similarities have more in common than the Africanist Aesthetic; they carry an essence, tradition, and social experiences that are expressed in the movement.

My experience in Ghana confirmed my belief that the values found in dance can transmit history, embodied knowledge, “identity formation, socialization, social change, and social interaction” (Jackson 41). In developing my curriculum, this process could contribute to my approach in reaching goals of self-identity, critical thinking, leadership skills, and social-political awareness. In exploring the dances, I would have to teach my
students how African traditions traveled throughout the world.

Chapter 3

Reflections of Elmina and Cape Coast

One of the most valuable experiences I had in Ghana was walking the same grounds as many enslaved Africans in Elmina and Cape Coast Slave Forts. It was in many ways an out of body experience. The forts were dark and the stench was heavy. The details that the tour guide shared with me of the conditions and torture of the enslaved Africans were hard to bear. “Slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America…because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by racial calculus and political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. [We live] the after life of slavery skewed life changes, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration and impoverishment” (Hartman 6).

I stood in the cell where the rebels who fought for freedom in the forts were left to die and I recognized that there were many resistance fighters who were “inventive, resourceful, well organized, and passionate about being free” (Anderson 84). I walked the stairs that female enslaved Africans were sent up, only to be raped by European men. If they refused to go they were chained to cannon balls naked and starved if they refused to go, as a devastating lesson for other women to learn. I learned more about the degradation, violence, and structures that were established for the captive men, women, and children before they arrived as cargo creating the system of labor, reproduction, and sexuality. I learned of the murder, suicide, rape, and use of black bodies as capital investment. I stood in the dungeons made of four hundred-year old feces, blood, and sweat, once filled with voices screaming for help, while Europeans had church services
in the chapel built over their heads. When we passed the graves of generals and leaders
of the castles, I spat. I felt angry and hurt that the world would allow such horrible
human injustice and even more angry that the complexities and history of the Slavery are
not taught in most black homes or in educational systems.

As I walked through the Door of No Return with my eyes closed, I spiritually
tried to connect with my ancestors, take in the experience and honor their struggle, and
the struggles that persist as a result of slavery. I imagined the ships filled to capacity
with, men, women, and children, chained, frail, and “stripped of their minds, spirit, [and]
culture” (72). I traveled through the dark rooms and looked through the small openings
that allowed a few rays of light. I imagined my ancestors standing in front of that ray of
light, praying, crying, and making a decision to try to stay alive. I poured a libation and
remembered those that were strong enough to endure the pain, conditions, and
oppression of slavery and its aftereffects. I was reminded of the power, the strength, and
the long history of fighting injustice. I thought about the fact that despite racial
oppression, black bodies still survive and how structures of slavery and oppression work
as an attempt to dis-embody knowledge.

If dance traditions have been kept and readapted in the body, has the trauma and
violence also been passed on? “We might as well ask if this phenomenon...actually
"transfers" from one generation to another” (Spillers, 260). Was this idea a way for me
to explain to my students why we continue to see and experience gratuitous violence and
the disavow of black struggle in our existence? It was in these moments that I realize
that our history has been erased and that we must be responsible in writing our own
history and take ownership of our bodies and our dance. I found closure in knowing the
truth as I felt, saw, heard, and smelt history in the slave forts. This knowledge gave me understanding of how and why black bodies continue to face social crisis and the importance of being aware, in order to mobilize towards cultural and structural change.

As my students and I create and explore movement I want them to learn that there is power in dancing bodies, and that “your body is a social text. It is spoken for by the legal infrastructures of society” (Ampka 83). As Dixon Gottschild asserts, if dance wasn’t powerful it would not have been prohibited, and if “Europeans weren't aware of the power of rhythm, the drum would have never been banned to avoid slave rebellion. There is power in rhythm-Black Power in Rhythm” (137). How would I begin to show the layers of this knowledge and make it relatable and valuable for my students?

My former experience teaching in underserved communities in Philadelphia, PA left me with the challenge to make dance matter in a bigger way. I made the mistake of assuming what my students needed to know before I knew them. They quickly resisted me. They found me unrelatable, maybe because of my education and the way that I spoke. I found them full of energy, passionate, and creative, yet broken, with no words to explain it. I was unsure if they had hope for a life outside of what they had always seen in the hood or if they should; how could they when they hadn’t seen anything else? It was because of those students that I felt compelled to find a way to make dance our common language and use it as a tool to navigate through lives that hinge on the social crisis of black existence.
Chapter 4

LEAP Civic Engagement Project: Dancing Sankofa

I needed to create a plan so that I could teach knowledge and information to Southern California black students and see if and how it would affect and educate them. Before creating the lesson plans, classroom procedures, and objectives for each class, I applied the principle of Sankofa, which is a Ghanaian word that means “reach back and get it”. This symbol represents acknowledging the past and the information it holds in order to move forward. My entire project is deeply inspired by the philosophy, work, and legacy of writer, producer, teacher, actress, and dancer, Dr. Barbara Ann Teer. Many visits to the National Black Theater and conversations with participants aided in my understanding of how the arts work in tandem with identity, power, and political consciousness.

The National Black Theatre (NBT) was founded in Harlem, NY in 1968. Lundeana Thomas, author of Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre: Transformational Forces in Harlem, explains that NBT implemented a theory of self-empowerment and self-determination through adopting six goals: Self Affirmation, Cooperation, Education, Spirituality, Values, and Liberation (Thomas 79-85). I used these goals as guidelines to develop the goals of my lesson plans and classroom procedures. Teer’s classes and performances addressed issues within black identity and structures of oppression that affect the Black community.

Training at NBT included the Evolutionary Movement Course, which explored African roots through improvisation. The course was "designed for the student to
experience his body as a ‘cosmic miracle’ so that his self-consciousness would dissolve” (103). Other classes that worked congruently included *Meditation and Spiritual Release* and *Liberation Theory*.⁹ Teer’s courses served as a guide for me to create strategies and approaches in the curriculum design for LEAP. In order to gain more insight on the philosophy and courses at NBT, I interviewed Abisola Faison, a dancer, actress, and the current fiscal director of The National Black Theatre. She shared with me the need for and importance of art with a consciousness. Her ideas helped me develop the idea of teaching my students about what is happening socially and politically in their community. Abisola Faison shared:

> Art will always be the voice of the freedom cry, [The National Black Theater] was something that evolved because of the need and the consciousness of the community. We needed a song and a dance along with the Civil Rights Movement back then, but today we don't need a new movement, because just like then they will kill the leader. What we need is to reform and change ourselves, change our minds.¹⁰

Faison’s interview challenged me to think critically about what I was searching for by investigating these ideas. In order to teach and share my goals, I needed to be sure to investigate my own experiences and become self-identified, by which I mean connected my own ancestry, culture, and definition of who I am as a black woman, without the over-determination of others. It is my goal to explore how dance serves the process of “de-crudding”, which Faison described as “getting rid of what you have been programmed to do and re-educating yourself about who you are.” Faison also shared that Dr. Teer’s mission was about "bringing people into a consciousness and re-formation of themselves to bring about a change.” Teer's ideas were influenced by Yoruba traditions and

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⁹ Thomas, Lundeana 102-105.
¹⁰ Dr. Barbara Ann Teer passed away July 21, 2008. I interviewed Abisola Faison, a student of Dr. Teer since 1969 and a member of her repertory company and is currently the Fiscal Director of The National Black Theatre.
revolutionary ideology, which helped to shape The National Black Theater and create art that would impact the community in an environment that was “free, open and striving for truth.” Teer shared her early experiences in an interview titled *Black Drama:*

I started working with teenagers, and they were all black kids from the Chelsea area, and I realized they had all this power and all this energy and the technique that I acquired could not channel it... it turned them off for me. I had to get with it or get out, my need to get with it was much more powerful than leaving. So I began to decrud... I began to create [plays] for them to express themselves through, because there were none... there was no research for what to do with Black kids.

Visiting the theater and investigating Teer’s philosophy and artistic journey motivated me to begin the process of finding my roots, researching African dance, and investigating the embodied historical and cultural knowledge of black bodies.

My goal is to connect my students to the ideas of self-definition and self-education by taking responsibility to learn their history, investigate their personal interests, and learn values by using dance. Novelist and theorist Nguigu Wa Thiong'o explains:

Values are the basis of a people’s identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race...culture carries the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics, and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other beings...To control a people’s culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others.  

The L.E.A.P Civic Engagement Project was held at George W. Crozier Middle School in Inglewood, CA, once a week over the course of 10 weeks. I had a total of ten students who participated in a one-hour class. Each lesson plan was developed using Barbara Ann Teer’s learning goals. The classes began with a exercise titled *I Am (Self-Affirmation)*: the students stand in a circle, becoming aware of their breath,

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11 Thiong’o Wa Ngui gui, Decolonizing the Mind (14-17).
acknowledging each other, and stepping to the circle to announce their names, their mood, or daily goal with a gesture. The second component of my lesson plan was developed in order to create a classroom culture. The students and I collectively decided on the behavior and values of the class with a Cooperation Contract (Cooperation and Values). The third component included assigning groups for the students to engage in conversations about what they know about history, Africa, and issues in the community, as well as what they want to learn. I shared photos and my experiences in Ghana and the students also had a Skype Q&A with Nani Agbeli, the director of the Dagbe Cultural Arts Center in Ghana.

The students were excited to learn about Africa from someone who lived there; they asked questions about the daily lifestyle, food, clothing, geography, languages, and dances. The students were also given journals to free-write about their own daily experiences, feelings, thoughts, dreams, and ideas in their spare time. By using the learning goals included in Teer’s philosophy, I gave my students time to freestyle (Improvise) and freely express themselves through movement in order to connect with their own sense of self without judgment (Spirituality). We also investigated feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem by sharing how peers, adults, and the community affects how we feel about ourselves and the responsibility we have for our own thoughts about ourselves (Liberation). The lessons also included learning a traditional Ghanaian dance called Agahu and old school Hip-hop.

The movement portion of class had an emphasis on introducing African dance culture, Hip-hop history, and addressing social issues and values in their communities. It was important to me to help my students become aware of their cultural history as

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12 I adopted the Cooperation Contract workshop and training sessions with educator and activist Bunmi Samuel.
members of the African diaspora and de-normalizing the realities of impoverished and
dangerous communities. At the end of each class, we would return to standing in a circle
and debrief by recalling what was valuable in the day’s lessons and activities
(Education) and collectively stating positive affirmations.

It was important for my classes to embark on “the quest for self-definition, self-
reliance, and self-determination” (Collins 144). These themes worked towards the goals
of addressing how black youth are often stereotyped and deemed disrespectful by the
media and even their elders, called by some a generation of “bad- behavior and self-
destructive culture” (Cohen 18). How adults perceive my students became a topic of
discussion after one of their freestyle sessions. We posed questions specifically about
how they are viewed and perceived among each other, adults, and media. As Collins
states: “Black youth who see the devastation affecting their communities [often] see
Afrocentrism as the only social critical theory interested in addressing the social
problems they face” (96).

Unfortunately, the majority of academic education and dance curricula are not
yet designed with specific initiatives to address, inform, and mobilize around the cultural
history of black people or the political movements that address social issues. Significant
to understanding the concepts behind Afrocentrism is the need to interact with African
culture and find value in a connection that moves beyond stereotypes and
misconceptions, as well as developing an awareness of Africa’s own colonization and
economic depression. The objectives of my civic engagement project were to provide
my students with the ability to engage in critical thinking, political awareness, and
creative expression and to develop shared cultural identity and leadership skills. ¹³

I addressed these ideas by creating a Hip-hop timeline and teaching my students dances that exist under the Hip-hop umbrella. My students were able to identify the similarities between traditional Ghanaian dances and Hip-hop as they know it. A major success of this project was when my students concluded that “since our dances are so much alike, we must be African too.” This statement created a dialogue around the history of the Middle Passage and how traditions and aesthetics have been maintained and transformed within black traditions. By investigating how and why many of the dances we explored were similar, my students were able to draw their own conclusions about being connected to Africa and how African Americans also influence Africa. I taught that through dance there is a constant exchange between the traditions passed on to the descendants of enslaved Africans in the United States and African traditions. In other words, “Hip-hop aesthetics have “boomeranged” back to the continent of Africa” (Osumare 33).

I adopted the concept of connective marginalities, which supported discussions with my students on global issues of “blackness” facing youth, and identified how they are expressed in African diaspora dances. While in Ghana, I was introduced to Hiplife music and a new dance being done by Ghana’s youth called Azonto which looks similar to Hip hop. According to University of Ghana lecturer Terry Ofosu, “Azonto is the way Ghana's youth are speaking about the working conditions and everyday life.” Identifiable in the movement are patterns of ironing, washing clothes, and boxing-like movements that comment on respect and protecting yourself. Ofosu says:

They are using movement and predominant activities to create a vocabulary that says we

¹³ See Appendix A for complete lesson plans.
need employment. The dance is saying 'we are broke, but we will survive,' as Ghanaians participate in Hip-hop they notice a common identity, that Hip-hop is our dance too.

I showed my students video and photos of me learning Azonto in the Ewe village, where I was taught by twelve-year-old Sarah Agbeli. My students then participated and showed each other their Azonto dances. By using the social commentary of Azonto as an example, my students worked in groups to develop and name their own dances that spoke of the social conditions in their communities. The dances they created and named included No Shoot (anti-gun violence), High & Lows (class and equality), and ‘Round Da World (access and financial ability to travel). This assignment served as a framework for addressing other issues similar to the ones shared in Cohen’s Black Youth Project. She shares that “the young people in our study first articulated the personal failings of black youth and then proceeded, sometimes after prompting, to outline the structural circumstances that make it hard for young black people to get ahead” (114).

In movement sessions when my students taught each other popular social dances, I asked them to question the messages in the dances, particularly if they felt the dances were dis-empowering or empty of political commentary. The process of consciously creating dances to make political statements and connecting my students to an African-centered collective identity worked towards developing a sense of identity outside of the images and negative messages that contribute to structures of marginalization. All of the lessons provided connections to my initial goals of Self Affirmation, Cooperation, Education, Spirituality, Values, and Liberation. I used exploration of African diaspora dances as a strategy for becoming more culturally conscious. Collins asserts that:
Children of the African diaspora have a homeland that they must revere, reclaim, and protect. By seeing their connections with Africa and defining themselves as African people, the lost children… can reclaim a Black consciousness and once again become centered in a true African personality (88).

The LEAP Civic Engagement Project taught my students how Hip-hop culture is rooted in Africa. In final group discussions, my students shared that they felt more confident about who they are as “black kids” and their contribution to the world. My response to them was:

If kids just like you can create something as global as Hip-hop, a multi- million dollar industry, there is nothing you can’t do, think about what is next, everything you do is a part of history, realize we are a creative people… you will always dance, its a part of our tradition. I challenge you to be sure your dance is saying something you want the world to hear. That is what is key, writing your own history is what has to happen in your generation...
Chapter 5

Challenges

The most significant challenges with the project included inconsistencies in attendance. There were some students who had to leave class early because they needed to walk home because of the danger in their neighborhoods after dark. There were also students who were on academic probation and needed to complete homework before coming to dance. This made it difficult to consistently move forward with the lesson plans. There were two students who had behavior problems at LEAP that were eventually suspended from the LEAP program.

During our final debrief and feedback sessions, some students shared that they wanted to spend more time dancing and not as much time talking. In retrospect, I found it difficult trying to balance historical content and open dialogue with movement instruction. I asked the students what difference would it make if I just taught them steps; would that affect their thinking and how they look at the community? They had no answer to this, I primarily just wanted them to think about it.

I also felt challenged facilitating in an institution that didn’t carry the same philosophy or practice, the same approach to education, or interaction with the students as I did. My method of trying to create an environment of respect for self and others, as well as a collaborative and democratic approach to the lessons, was often challenged by the actions and approaches of other adults, who in passing may have seen my students “doing their own thing” or talking in my first few visits. However, observing changes in student behavior from disinterested or distracted to engaged and curious was necessary in order to measure the qualitative results concluding the project.
I want to make clear that it was and is not my intention to save my students; I cannot, the structures are too big and embedded in the makeup of society. I am dedicated to affirming them by serving as a catalyst in gaining knowledge and building their sense of self: “Once they are affirmed and introduced in a conscious way to the African world view, it becomes crystal clear to them and they see an urgency in us as African people building for self… as opposed to imitating forms that have been put in place to make sure that we continue to be oppressed” (Marimba Ani Yurugu).

At the conclusion of the project, there was a better sense of community, self-respect, and desire to attain more information about dance and cultures around the world. I allowed my students to freely express themselves based on their interests and needs. This in turn supported my overall goals and guided them in critical thinking, learning the embodied knowledge in African diaspora dances, and becoming aware of social-political issues that face the black community.
Chapter 6

Choreographic Process

I decided to cast UCI undergraduate students of African descent for the choreographic representation of my research. It was important to cast black bodies to explore my creative ideas and themes around cultural history, and to employ some of the same teaching methods developed from my civic engagement project. There were a total of eight young women performed in a 30-minute work titled Hieroglyphics, which was inspired by Hortense Spillers:

undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually "transfers" from one generation to another…? (260)

My choreography explores themes of slavery, gratuitous violence, African diaspora dances and traditions, social identity formation in communal spaces, and social death. I began this process by reflecting on my own experiences and decided that I wanted my choreography to be a narrative of themes that arose during my research process.

Before beginning each rehearsal I asked my cast about their personal feelings and experiences towards blackness. This prepared me to begin the process of selecting articles and films that would serve the artistic process of my dancers. Questions included: What are your feelings about economically disenfranchised black communities? How does dance play a role in addressing those issues? What do you want your contribution to dance history to be? What are your short-term goals and long-term ideas of success?

It was important for me to see if and how my cast placed themselves in the black
community, if they were aware of social political issues and their knowledge of history. Before rehearsals began, my dancers watched *Free to Dance* (2001), a PBS documentary that chronicles the contributions and experiences of black dancers and choreographers to modern dance. All of my dancers were not aware of this rich history and responded that “we didn’t know we were such a big part of dance.” My dancers needed to be introduced to these ideas and people in order to obtain deeper connections to themselves. Together we shared and expressed insecurities and goals for this process. It was important for me to help the dancers investigate who they were as individuals and as black dancing bodies.\(^\text{14}\)

I wanted to teach my dancers that before our bodies dance they carry history; our bodies are always performing because we are constructed by race and gender constructs of patriarchal white supremacy. I believed that approaching my choreography with these ideas in mind I would provoke a unique experience and approach to movement rather than just imitating my experience. The dancers learned of the history of objectifying the black body. As Henderson writes about Sarah Baartman and Josephine Baker in Europe, an image of the black body “appealed to a continental appetite for romanticized notions of primitive... it was the body that became the index of racial difference” (108).\(^\text{15}\) As well as becoming cognizant of projections of the black woman in performance as exotic and hyper-sexual, along with anthropological notions of dancing black bodies as the “happy natives.” There are elements of my choreography that blur the lines between agency and conformity for the sake of accuracy in portraying experience

\(^{14}\) Black Dancing Body is a term coined by Brenda Dixon Gottschild that investigates the aesthetics of dance and the challenges and centrality of the black body.

\(^{15}\) Sarah Baartman was a woman from South Africa who was used in the 19th century as a Freak show attraction in Europe. The story of Sarah Baartman is inclusive to many other African Women whose bodies were scientifically used to construct race and gender ideologies of inferiority. University of California Irvine Political Science undergraduate Venus Green facilitated discussions about the history of the black woman’s body as sexual and primitive. The dancers were challenge critically think about the black dancer’s body in performance today.
and environment.

Each rehearsal began with a personal check in, when the dancers would share how they were doing in their classes and issues such as isolation, judgment, and fear that arise in their everyday lives on and off the UCI campus. I wanted to create a space where the dancers could openly vent and later apply those feelings and emotions to their performance quality. We also engaged in conversations and questions about the readings and film; this would be followed by affirmation exercises and Dunham technique and African dance exercises.

It was important to me to amplify the politicized content of Hieroglyphics by selecting music that clearly articulates messages that support its themes. The movement vocabulary of this work draws on Afro--Modern, Senegalese, Ghanaian, Jazz, and Hip--hop dance, as well as the aesthetic of the cool, isolation, polycentrism, syncopation, and lyricism. Together, this fusion achieves my goals to symbolize the journey of self-- definition, the cultural history of black traditions, and the disequilibrium of black existence.

The first section of this piece is titled Reflections of Forts and Seas. Before starting choreography we listened to the musical selection “Africa” by dramatist, novelist, and poet Amiri Baraka. The dancers were directed to close their eyes and notice the images or feelings that arose while listening to the song. Other musical selections for this section include “Assico” by Ghana M’BAYE. The second section titled Party On...Passing Off, is a series of social and vernacular dances located under the Hip--hop umbrella. With this section I wanted to show the process of identity formation, socialization, and community building that takes place in freestyle circles similar to traditional African dance which is “reflective of those practices similar to those
Music for this section includes Hip-hop classics, such as Afrika Bambaataa and James Brown’s “Peace Unity Love & Having Fun”, Rob Base and DJ E-Z Rock’s “It Takes Two”, DJ Kool’s “Let Me Clear My Throat” as well as a series of popular dance songs selected by my dancers. This section captures the fun, creativity, vitality, and energy of social events, while also portraying its quick interruption by the harsh reality of violence. By staging popular social dances, I question how young black bodies are made visible and invisible by the violence their bodies are both subjected and objected to. This is highlighted by Mos Def’s “Murder of a Teenage Life”. The words and sound of the music serve as my guide, I use “music [ as a ] vehicle of power and identity to understanding the Africanist Aesthetic and its role in hip-hop” (Gottschild 138-). The concluding section Finding Mother explores the power of spirit and traditions that sustain and strengthen the black community despite structures of oppression. The dancers embody moments of “erotic” as it was redefined by Audre Lorde as self-love, affirmation, recognition, and physical connection to each other. 

Many of my dancers had never been taught the foundation of Hip-hop, including house dance vocabulary and freestyle. We explored groundedness, musicality, polycentrism, and improvisation by taking turns freestyling in the center of the circle. My dancers expressed their frustration, fear, and feelings of judgment towards dancing by themselves with a Hip-hop and African dance vocabulary during rehearsals. Over time they became more confident letting go of their modern and ballet training and connecting with the African Aesthetic. I coached my dancers by saying: “feel the music, discover your body, talk to us, share with us, conquer your

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16 I use the terms Old and New School to represent the vernacular and social dances done and re-adapted separated by different generations.

17 See Patricia Hill Collins Black Sexual Politics.
fears.” I carried House dance legend Marjory Smarth’s 18 philosophy into this coaching process, which I summarize as follows:

If you choose to speak this universal language [of house dance], you must represent it for what it is, it is a divine language. We have enough people in the world that put rules upon you to trap your soul. We as artists have a duty to teach the world how to balance, so they can really move freely. Without this universal vibration, I wouldn’t still be here.

This idea resonates in so many ways to my research and choreographic process, especially in terms of how black dancers define ourselves, our roles as artists, and how the vibration of dance allows us to survive and continue to exist despite the challenges we face.

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18 In the fall of 2013, I attended Open House, a Los Angeles-based House dance session that honored Marjory Smarth. At the end of her class, she shared her experience, philosophy, responsibility, and belief in dance, this is a summary from my notes.
Chapter 7

Rehearsal Feedback and Results

In each rehearsal I noticed the dancers becoming more confident and developing a sense of community and sisterhood. As we went on they began asking detailed questions about the choreography and performance quality. We engaged in conversation about what we wanted the audience to question or conclude after the performance. My choreographic ideas evolved from steps into literal gestures and narratives. As well as exploring new ways to stage the dances and develop relationships in space, I became less interested in technique and execution and more interested in the passion and feelings expressed in their faces and in the dynamics of the movement.

One dancer shared with me, “it feels good to be learning about myself and my history. In my dance background, I always had to learn about everyone else and who I was, was who everyone else wanted me to be.” Some of the written feedback from the UCI dancers includes:

I feel empowered and challenged during this process, I feel that I am learning a lot more about my history, ancestors, and myself. It makes all the difference in my dancing when I think about what and who I am dancing for.

I feel informed as an African American woman, doing so much background work really helped me to connect to Africa and to understand which moments draw from historical hardships and struggles.

I am learning what it is to be around a community of black women that support and uplift me and learn more about my own culture...I’ve never gotten this experience.

I felt more dedicated to the personal and collective development, consciousness, and emotional catharsis of the dancers rather than the final product. Once this was achieved, I thought the actual performance would stand on its own because of the power of the principles that the work was built on, which continue to be Self Affirmation, Cooperation, Education, Spirituality,
Values, and Liberation.
Chapter 8

Conclusion

The objective of this research has been to use dance as a tool to educate black youth about their cultural history and social political awareness. This process has been designed for them to acknowledge the value, culture, and power that exist in their black bodies, and in the dances of the African diaspora. Using Hip-hop history and the Africanist Aesthetic has been a successful approach to showing the past history and continuum of creative processes, black traditions, and political mobilization.

This research has not only supplied me with more tools for my own mobilization through artistic practices, but also to be able to share, educate, and serve marginalized youth by developing an education model that can be applied by other educators and teachers. In the journey of looking for equilibrium on the continent of Africa, I have become aware of Africa’s own economic and cultural exploitation and colonization. I realized that the struggles of African Americans are an extension of Africa’s own. By looking to the motherland we can find a culture, language, and acknowledgement of how the African diaspora came to be “a process and condition. As a process it is always in the making, and as a condition it is situated within global race and gender hierarchies” (Patterson, Kelly 11).

I believe that educating future generations with a sense of self and cultural awareness will make a difference and challenge the impact of over determination. Enactments of mobilization can be pointed to in civil protests of organized groups of black youth. While living in Philadelphia, I became aware of Teen Flash mobs, where black youth are identified in the news as violently destroying Center City and endangering themselves, pedestrians, and police. I see these flash mobs as a form of youth mobilization and as an opportunity to get black youth
politically engaged and active. In the demonization and hyper visibility of the flash mob participants (who are black teenagers), I find it vital to recognize the violence that they are subjected to by the state and civil society. How does one question enactments of violence in a sphere where it has always existed? The power and mobilization is present and it is vital that young people are aware and activate the power within themselves to claim what is theirs.

Dance offers a creative, spiritual, and communal practice where “we are reconnecting the dismembered parts of ourselves,” as Hip hop dancer Sekou Heru stated during an interview with me. Hip-hop can serve as a platform to politically engage, mobilize, and unite black youth as long as they are able to ask questions about what is useful and empowering and what is a part of the structural system of new racism. The truth behind the message is what is key to impacting their consciousness and standing against representations and appropriations that are not reflective of the true culture. After hearing about my goals and purpose of this research Heru responded:

[The true] message has got to get to the youth, they have to take control of their art form, to make sure it’s represented the way it’s suppose to be, so they can use it as a tool to navigate through society and not end up incarcerated, or stripping at a pole, or taking drugs… Hip-hop is and has always been political, as soon as we started infusing messages into our cultural systems, it became political because we are the political prisoners of what made this [capitalist country] rich. So everything we do is political. The message in the music is political. Even graffiti is a code, like the same way messages on temple walls are a code... there is no difference, it is the same as ancient art, but modified for this time. If you don’t know the messages… and didn't grow up in hip-hop culture or the boroughs of the hood… you can't [understand the message] because you not suppose to… because we are talking about empowerment, we are talking about what’s going on, bringing to light what is happening in the neighborhoods. Which stirs up political issues, because representations in politics are suppose to represent the communities first.

This research, civic engagement project, and choreography concert is just the beginning of a larger framework that can be implemented into a curriculum for public and higher education
systems. Many education systems are focused on diversity, multiculturalism, and initiatives to improve education. This model could be an outline for engaging and addressing some of the gaps in educational curriculums in subjects such as history, social studies, politics, and arts.

Although I feel incredibly inspired and honored in this journey, I also recognize the long term challenges that surface when it comes to educating and mobilizing large masses of black youth. Although performance is my platform for mobilization, will my intended audience of black youth, families, and educators be in the audience or will the audience be filled with privileged whiteness? I am faced with the bottom line, that performance does not reconcile the realities of blackness for disenfranchised youth. When the music stops and the lights go off, what do we return to?

This research and education model has proven to educate the participants and promote critical thinking, knowledge about black history and creative intelligence, and structures of oppression and anti-blackness that exist in civil society and are protected by law. With this knowledge black youth can develop an awareness of how and why major socio-political issues face the black community, create forums for expressing themselves both politically and artistically, and become more dedicated to education and pursuing advanced degrees.

It is vital to be informed about messages and images that are constantly portrayed about blackness that help to form identities and global ideologies that make up society. Art serves as a tool to educate, create public spaces for critical thought and reflection, and approach to mobilize and evoke change at micro and macro levels. I conclude this portion of my research with a series of unanswered questions, as well as awareness that there may not
be a link between “performance and the emancipation of black people who produce and consume it” (Wilderson 121). Performance is a voice, it is a driving force, but it is not structural change. I invoke the phrase inspired by Abisola Faison, "Dance is a culture transmission vehicle”, by creating platforms for both formal and informal black dance education, we are able to unearth the culture and contributions that have been as “dreadlocked” (Brenda Dixon Gottschild) into society.

Whether or not this research, education, or creating institutions that carry its philosophy, will change the disenfranchisement of black youth or the marginalization of black performance and scholarship is a question I do not have an answer to. I do know that there is value in investing in future generations, knowing our history as black people, and realizing that despite it all, we still survive. Moving black bodies tell our history, a history that is being created and danced in every moment.
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Appendix A:

Lesson Plan Outline

This dance education model is developed from research in learning dances of the African Diaspora. This civic engagement project is designed for the cultural and historical development of African American youth in disenfranchised communities. Its aim is to support its participants with the tools and ability to engage in critical thinking, political awareness and mobilization, creative expression, cultural identity, and leadership skills.

Standards and Expectations

Students should actively participate in creating and respecting the learning environment.

- Vision Board
- Cooperation Contract
- Personal Goals and Expectations

Goals and Objectives of Project:

To explore personal and cultural identity by tracing the lineage of Hip-hop dance to traditional African Dance.

- Demonstrate knowledge of cultural history.
- To gain better sense of political awareness and social action.
- To gain confidence and freedom in personal expression.
- To create a historic timeline which includes their own history.
- To demonstrate understanding of movement vocabulary.
- Develop performance based off the foundation of the research.

Classroom Activities

Warm Up: Each class begins with a physical warm up in a circle. Students are allowed freestyle and embrace improvisation within specific movement vocabulary. (15 minutes)
**Literacy Journal Writing:** Participate in journal writing/discussion responses. Students can share their responses and engage in open conversation.

- What does success mean to you?
- What are the things you would change about your community?
- Do you feel your school has the resources it needs?
- Do you feel it accurately portrays your life to the rest of the world?
- Do you feel like Hip-hop artists should or should not support their communities?
- Is hip-hop your culture? Why or why not?

**Learning Goals and Exercises:**

**Self-Affirmation**

*Exercise*- Students boldly and confidently express who they are by stepping in the circle and doing a gesture with the word. Work together to create a group affirmation.

**Cooperation and Values**

Students learn to work together as a group to accomplish goals and set classroom value systems.

*Exercise*- Cooperation contract/Icebreakers/Peer Correction

**Education**- Students learn about cultural history

*Exercise*- Ask students a discussion question.

Ex: Where are we now in history? How do you express it? What is dance saying about who you are?

**Spirituality** - Students are taught to embrace and spend time in silence listening to themselves and documenting their thoughts and ideas.

*Exercise*- Creative movement phrase that expresses what you have written.

**Liberation**- Students embrace their culture and question socio-economic conditions.

*Exercise*- Create a social dance that demonstrates what is happening in your community.
THE END OF THE TUNNEL
A MFA Concert Presented by
Sakina Ibrahim & Stefanie Maughan

May 7, 2014 at 7:30 PM | Claire Trevor Theatre
Claire Trevor School of the Arts
University of California, Irvine
THANK YOU ALL FOR YOUR UNWAVERING SUPPORT.

MUCH LOVE,

Sakina & Stefanie
I would like to dedicate this research to my ancestors and freedom fighters. Thank you for the sacrifices you have made and the blood that was shed so that I could be here today. I would like to thank my mother and father whose life experiences, challenges, and vision made me the woman I am today. My grandparents who always supported me in all of my pursuits. To my brother, aunts, uncles, and extended family whose laughter and prayer have always helped me to sustain my faith.

To Bunmi Samuel who helped me to find my voice as an artist and educator and who introduced me to new pathways to navigate my way through my purpose. To the many young people I have worked with in Philadelphia whose passion, creativity, aggression, and disenfranchisement have sparked the vision and mission of this research. I am forever grateful to you all for challenging me and teaching me who I am through your eyes.

Thank you to all of my dance teachers and mentors that include Laurice Jiggetts, Carol-Ann Broadway, Jodi Faulk, Jennifer Pollins, Kalpana Devi, Kim Bears-Bailey, Jennifer Johnson, and Zane Booker who always emphasised the importance of the creative process and having meaning to your choreography. Thank you to Donald McKayle, whose work and choreographic process has made me think about the journey and not just the destination.

I acknowledge my dance ancestors such as Pearl Primus, Katherine Dunham, and Barbara Ann Teer who began a journey searching for cultural roots, identity, power, and liberation through the medium of dance and theater. They paved the way of using dance as an agent of cultural awareness and social activism, the legacy they began continues to live in my work.

Thank you to my Masters of Fine Arts committee members Jennifer Fisher, Sheron Wray, Molly Lynch, and Tiffany Willoughby-Herard who have showed continuous support and guidance throughout this process. Special thanks to Medici Award, UCIRA, and UCI travel and research grant.
CHOREOGRAPHY
SAKINA IBRAHIM

Sakina Ibrahim is a Masters of Fine Arts Candidate at the University of California, Irvine (expected 2014) and Alumni of The University of the Arts. She is a recipient of The Dance Outreach Award and The Excellence in Performance Award (UARTS), as well as the Medici Scholar and UCIRA Awards. She has received scholarships to programs such as Bates Dance Festival, University of Illinois, and The Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance. Sakina has worked with choreographers such as Anthony Burrell, Christopher Huggins, Troy Kirby, Zane Booker, the legendary Louis Johnson and currently assisting dance legend Donald McKayle. Her credits include Women of Hip-Hop with Rennie Harris PureMovement/RHAV, Jill Scott, Grammy Winning Artist Helen Bruner and Terry Jones, Oscar winning film The Silver Linings Playbook and choreographer for Award winning International film Young@Heart. She has presented her research at conferences at UC Irvine, Albany State University, and UCLA. She is currently faculty member at Saddleback College and continues to fulfill her purpose by facilitating and participating in dance scholarship conferences, youth outreach, and dance education.

PROGRAM & MUSIC

REFLECTIONS OF FORTS AND SEAS
AFRICA BY AMIRI BARAKA
ASSICO BY GHANA M’BAYE

PARTY ON…PASSING OFF
DANCE MIX BY DJ STATIK
MURDER OF A TEENAGE LIFE BY MOS DEF

FINDING MOTHER
(THE CHANGE) BY NASIR DICKERSON
BAWA BY NANI AGBIELI AND DAGRE CULTURAL ARTS CENTER STAFF

DANCERS
AIDAH ALBAQIR
CRYSTAL BURTON
IRISHA HUBBARD
ALIZE IRBY
MAKETTA JOHNSON
ONGELLE JOHNSON
JAZMYNE MCNEESE
AINEKO DAVIS PEARSON

COSTUMES
CHEYENNE WISE

THIS PROGRAM IS A CHOREOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF MY RESEARCH IN GHANA TRACING THE ORIGINS OF AFRICAN DIASPORA DANCES, THE INHERITED KNOWLEDGE, TRADITIONS, AND TRAUMA KEPT IN BLACK BODIES THROUGHOUT SLAVERY, AND MY CIVIC ENGAGEMENT PROJECT FACILITATING DANCE CURRICULUM AT THE LEAP AFTER SCHOOL PROGRAM.


CHINUA ACHEBE
ASHÉ!