African Dance as a Liberation Force for African American Women: A Case Study of the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts

by

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Abstract

This paper is based on an analysis of narratives of six Oakland, California-based African American women who have studied, performed and/or taught traditional African dance forms for at least fifteen years. The narratives were the result of one-on-one, open-ended, semi-structured interviews. It is argued that: (1) these women have acquired long-lasting, quality friendships and a network of community resources among other Black women as a result of their perennial involvement in African dance training, (2) African dance is a viable tool for stress relief and the balancing of emotional and mental health when coping with the challenges of day-to-day life, (3) African dancers acquire a healthier body and self-image and are more inclined to reject mainstream standards of beauty and fashion by embracing their more natural beauty, while creating and expressing alternate styles, (4) African dance allows the women in this study to become repeatedly rejuvenated and more spiritually fulfilled, thereby contributing to their overall sense of well-being, (5) African dance participants experience a heightened sense of power, control and agency over their bodies and minds as they experience a long-term freedom from sexual repression and ideas of guilt or shame often associated with a woman's sexuality and sensuality, and lastly that (6) African American women who commit to the study and practice of traditional African dance forms for an extended period of time tend to experience an expanded sense of cultural identity, pride and self, nurturing a dignified sense of community and belonging.

Introduction

In regard to race, gender, cultural medium and social platform, African-dancing Black women are constrained by these four margins of subordination before we even move a limb. With this hegemonic totem in place, the racialized, genderized body becomes a natural site for political resistance; particularly in a country where Black women are most widely represented and understood by pop culture media as destructive and bitter, over-sexual and under-educated, substandard in beauty as well as humanity, and ultimately, visionless and broken. Thus, it has become urgent to highlight narratives which dismantle such falsely projected identities and to emphasize vehicles which in-source qualified measures of community building and joy, pride and dignity, self-love and Black-love. Here, in the use of Black-love, I choose to pronounce ethnicity as a preface to the term "love" in order to confront and dismantle mainstream media's projection - and the subsequent mass perception - of Black women as destructively competitive, envious, deceptive and cruel to one another. This adjective/noun combination is widely used among the African dance and drum community and beyond, and is a celebration of the support, encouragement, applause and assistance that Black women (and men) proudly offer each other.

There are countless Black women who have found great pride and purpose in what they value as the spiritual practice and community-bridge called “African Dance” and I had the pleasure of interviewing a handful from Oakland, California in 2011. These women assert the pivotal impact that the art form has had on their constructs of self-identity and self-concept, including gender, sexuality, body image, spirituality and a sense of belongingness.

Since the mid-1970s, African dance and drum traditions have been a catalyst for community building and pan-African consciousness among Black peoples in Oakland, California. Past and current scholarship however, seems to ignore this trend. Instead, it focuses primarily on the art form’s application in historical, traditional and geographic contexts (Tierou 1992; Welsh-Asante 2000; Reed 2003; Tang 2007; et al.), and demonstrates that for many continental Africans, the dance and drum tradition is a viable source of individual and community strength, power, and harmony, throughout the process of human development and the many phases of life. Focusing on the art form only within regions of its origination however, portrays the tradition as fixed in both meaning and significance. Moreover, in a separate body of literature about traditional folk and cultural dances, there is some research on the formation of national and transnational identities among immigrants who participate in traditional dances from their homeland while residing in new countries (Ram 2000; Wilcox 2011). While both bodies of research are important, the sociocultural significance of traditional African dances as practiced in the United States is not yet thoroughly examined, nor is the relationship between *African* dance and participating *African American* women.

The purpose of this research then, was to examine the (re)formation of identity within a unique set of "immigrants" who, unlike those found in current research, did not migrate to the United States on their own accord nor with their cultural traditions intact. Instead, they are descendants of those who were violently and forcefully removed from their geographic and cultural contexts and brought to exist in a country which continued to disassociate them from their heritage, including participation in cultural dance and drum traditions. Further these "immigrants" are perpetually force-fed dehumanizing images of themselves, thereby disrupting them from developing positive, culturally-relevant self-identities.

Centuries later, outside of its geographic and social context, African dance and drum traditions have been (re)introduced and (re)integrated into a number of African American communities, and particularly, into the lives of a significant population of African Americans in Oakland, California. By critically examining a people who have been brutally and historically removed from, and then reunited with an activity that was once central to their ancestors' growth, life, culture, land, family and relationships, we may begin to understand the cultural relevance of, and the relationship between, African dance and African American women; all while allowing them to connect to and be empowered by a pre-colonial sense of self in political protest of the social environments which tend to exploit, devalue, and marginalize them.

Because I have the privilege of being an integral part of the community I have chosen to study, it gives me direct access to its people. My study uses a culturally-informed ethnography as its guiding method and includes interviews for broad insight and thoroughness. Patricia Hill Collins' theory of "learning from the outsider within" is a guiding principle of this ethnographic approach. The method of locating personal experience and asserting the "insider's" voice to speak for herself is positioned to combat the image distortion, marginalization, or altogether omission of the relationship between African American women and African dance in cultural studies and dance theory. It is no secret that theories about Black women have, until recently, been traditionally asserted by outsiders – White scholars and theorists who have long defined and controlled images of African American women and womanhood. Collins argues that this tendency has been central to the dehumanization of Black women. Here, I allow dancers to speak for themselves, while their narratives offer a deeper understanding of how African dance has re-shaped our collective cultural consciousness, and consequently, our self-identity.

The analyses set forth are born of narratives told during one-on-one, open-ended, semi-structured interviews with six Oakland-based African American women who have studied, performed and/or taught African dance for at least fifteen years. Each dancer was carefully selected from the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts and chosen under two basic assumptions: 1) she is dedicated to promoting and preserving African dance in the U.S, and particularly, in Black communities including, but not limited to Oakland, California, and 2) she identifies herself as a part of the local and nationwide community - the sub-culture of African dance. These two assumptions were later confirmed in each interview.

Aside from their long-term commitment to African dance forms, their demographics show a diverse range of ages and careers. Their age range is from 32 to 52 years, and their occupations are corporate attorney, furniture business owner, arts administrator, childbirth educator, medical assistant, and customer service consultant, respectively. Each woman teaches or has previously taught African dance classes to youth and/or adults. Additionally, each woman has a solid history of traditional African dance performance on local, national, and/or international stages. And thus, their narratives assert how African American women are not only positively impacted by their participation in African dance in relation to identity, integral health, spirituality, sexuality and self-image, but also how they are indeed sociopolitical agents acting as cultural shape-shifters.

(Re-)Valuation of Self: African (slash) American

Data in this study suggests that African dance influences African American women to feel more informed and/or linked to their African ancestral heritage, as well as stimulates a sense of belongingness. One dancer says that in her youth, she "romanticized" her African roots having only a skewed knowledge of African royalty. She admits that she mostly associated her young self with that aspect of African history, while holding disdain for the overwhelming information about Africans in relation to enslavement during secondary school. Since studying traditional African dances however, she has come to learn, understand and appreciate more of the cultural and economic variances across the continent. She feels more "linked" in a way that her studies of Africa in secondary school did not allow. She asserts with passion and nostalgia:

"In African dance, there is a spirit link. We learn about the countries, the people, the traditions, and eventually, we come to learn more about ourselves. And it's all very organic. When I first started dancing, I thought, somehow, some way, I was brought here [to African dance class] and it just feels right. This is where I belong."

Another dancer laments that she's heard from so many African American women desire to travel to Europe rather than Africa because of the negative perceptions that the content of Africa has in the United States. She complains that American history books, which portray Africans as "slaves" – as though they have always been slaves – rather than having *been enslaved in America,* and that implementing terms like the "slave trade" rather than "the African diaspora" when discussing how Africans were disbursed throughout the Americas, cause fear, shame or disdain; she argues that it prevents many African Americans from wanting to be associated with Africa and continental Africans at all. Further she asserts that, thanks to the media, poverty, famine, illness, and disease tend to be the common Western perceptions of the continent, resulting in a lack of interest from African Americans who travel abroad. She suggests

that, when African Americans change the terms of their learning – how we view and discuss the history of African American phenomena such as pre-colonial selves, the American slave trade, the capture and enslavement of Africans – we may change our relationship to Africa itself. She continues to say that, while the perceptions of extreme poverty and disease are true of many of African countries, the richness of history, culture and tradition, and the beautiful spirits of those who she has met in the Congo, Guinea, Zimbabwe and Senegal, significantly outweigh those misgivings on which Westerners tend to focus and criticize. Further analyses of this data reveals that there are plenty of reasons for African Americans to visit the continent – one being, to "see themselves" in the Africans who never left home.

Another dancer shares that the connection to her African heritage, which she experiences in dance classes at the Malonga Center, were exemplified when she studied in Guinea, West Africa for the first time. Additionally, her family has struggled with obesity for generations and participating in African dance addresses that issue and much more. "I work out, I run around Lake Merritt, I take aerobics classes," she says, but it is African dance that gives her both the workout *and* the "social, cultural and emotional connection" needed to keep her interested, motivated and active, as well as keep any extra pounds away. She adds that, traveling to Guinea allowed her to partake in local customs like eating with her hands, negotiating for "everything" at markets, adjusting to certain spices, and fumbling with a new language; and yet, her foreign-ness to the customs still enabled a sense of belonging. She eventually understood, she said, the word *African* in the term *African American* and as a result, has an increased sense of awareness, understanding and pride in using the term.

More compelling perhaps is data in this study that suggests that African dancers of more than ten years will likely travel to Africa, and more specifically to a region in which their dance of choice originates. Before this selected group of women became African dancers, each admits that travel to Africa was a faint idea, a vague desire likely to never materialize. The specific countries they might visit were undefined if considered at all, travel arrangements never made, and an itinerary, never designed. Data in this examination shows however, that dancers who develop a liking to Congolese, Senegalese, Guinean and other African dance forms soon become a part of an actual community of African people - more specifically, with the dance teachers, drummers and families of people native to the countries from which the dances come. And interestingly, the teachers and drummers in local communities help to foster a sensible degree of accessibility to Africa itself, which is not commonly present for African American women outside of the dance and drum communities. Suddenly the idea of travel to Africa becomes tangible, the regions of interest identified, concrete plans to travel are formed, and plans to dance top the itinerary. Of these six dancers, women who study Guinea dance traveled to Guinea, dancers who practice Senegalese and *sabar* dance traveled to Senegal, and one dancer traveled to Zimbabwe to study and perform, and then on to the Congo to study and teach.

Another dancer traveled to Senegal, the country from which *sabar*, her favorite dance originates, as well as the nearby countries of Gambia and Liberia. And, while one dancer traveled with family on an individually planned trip, three traveled in groups with either dance companies or with dance teachers, who organize annual dance camps in their home countries.

Interestingly, when asked if they spoke other languages, particularly French and/or African languages spoken by people in the regions they've visited, five out of six dancers said they can only manage proper greetings and basic terms. They emphasize the value of speaking these languages when traveling and when conversing with people born in Africa both on the continent and in the Oakland dance community. With some reluctance however, they admit that they have not pro-actively moved forward on their desires to become more fluent. Nevertheless, five out of six interviewees traveled to Africa at least once, and as a result, nurtured and elevated their sense in African ethos.

In addition to its becoming a catalyst for travel to Africa and a vehicle for a more expansive sense of cultural-identity, data in this study also suggests that African dance also helps African American women strengthen relationships with one another. Collins (1999) asserts that an important theme in African American women's culture is to have a secure sense of sisterhood. This value, she argues, permeates (our) approach to life itself. In-so-doing, both the ability to self-define and secure solid bonds of sisterhood are realized to valuably inform our perspectives and improve the quality of our lives. Accordingly, the data in this exercise contends that African dance improves both the approach and quality of lives, provides an important space for nurturing sisterly and extended-familial ties, and is a safe, supportive, and encouraging space for the seemingly necessary act of self-(re)definition, self-love, sisterly-love and Black-love for African American women who have committed to its study and practice.

Five out of six of the dancers say that their closest friendships today are with women from the African dance community:

"Most of my good friends have come out of the dance community. I still have friends I grew up with, but my good sister-friends are all close to me because we share the same passion, we've gotten dressed together in the middle of the streets to prepare for performances, we've been doing this together for years. Friendship is definitely a benefit of Oakland's African dance community. Solid, outside of the [dance] studio, friendships," –African Dancer of 20 years.

One dancer says it solidified relationships she already had with childhood friends, with whom she'd grown up first learning and performing street dances. Four out of six dancers say that African dance participation expanded their circle of friends dramatically. Each of the six dancers has invited or introduced several other African American women to dance classes, adding to an already rich community.

Further, each dancer adds to the vitality of this community as she supports, seeks services or seeks recommendations from the wealth of dancers who are also vendors, performing artists, child care providers, medical care providers, attorneys, writers, educators and a plethora of other professions. Outside of the dance, it is the network itself which continues to bring women of the Malonga Center together, strengthen bonds between them, and build community among them.

One dancer boasts that Oakland's African dance community has helped to improve the reputation of the city itself. When considering the recent trend of media coverage in Oakland, which emphasizes a high rate of violent crimes and general waywardness, she insists that, *"Oakland is known to have some 'bad' African dancers! This is something our city can be proud of."* (Here, the term *bad* of course, means *good*.) Overall, dancers speak of the "rich" African and African-diasporic traditions embedded within Oakland's larger community, allowing them to in-source a sense of belongingness and cultural pride.

Dancing Inside Out: It's What's Inside That Counts

"Beautiful African dancing comes from your attitude, your aura, and your spirit. It really has nothing to do with your weight, your height, your physicality, or your technique," -African dancer of 16 years.

Two dancers credit their modern dance training and experience to the protocol of their respective professional dance companies with which they each became affiliated as young dancers. Company members were *required* to study jazz and ballet in addition to Afro-Haitian and West African dance styles. Both women admit that they may not have otherwise ventured into modern dance classes had they not been required to. Another dancer, who performs and choreographs African and modern dance routines, warns that African American women who practice African dance "religiously" tend to be reluctant to try other movement styles. They should venture outside of their comfort zone, she argues, because bridging African and American contemporary forms will allow them to further access and stimulate the relationship between their minds, bodies and varying cultural contexts.

Another dancer however, laments that the rigid idea of "right" and "wrong" movement executions, as typically emphasized in ballet, modern, and jazz dance classes is very frustrating. Similarly, other dancers complain that American contemporary dance tends to offer limited flexibility to "own" and express the movement in a way that is natural to individual bodies (and spirits).

Certainly traditional African dances and American contemporary dances are visibly distinct from each other. At the simplest observation, one will likely note between styles, the difference in aesthetic quality – technique, movement pattern, the physicality of dancers (i.e., body type and the way a dancer holds her body), and the variances in use of space and time. The data in this study however, suggests that the substantial difference between African and non-African dance styles is that the former registers to a Black woman's body as "familiar", while the latter tends to feel "foreign". Each of the five women with American contemporary dance training commented that these particular styles were "awkward" and "unnatural" to their bodies, and too "structured" or "rigid" for their personal tastes. Dancers found the rhythmic, polyrhythmic, and movement patterns of African dance however, to be "friendlier" to their bodies. All six dancers expressed some distaste toward the controlled uniformity and conformity of American contemporary dance styles in concept and physical execution, and prefer African dance because it allows movement and stylistic freedom.

One dancer argues that the practice of ballet is simply counterintuitive to (her) body. She recounts experiences in which ballet instructors encouraged her and other young dancers to *manipulate their bodies* in order to "fit" the movements, rather than *manipulate the movements* to fit their bodies. For example, she (and three others) made some reference to ballet's requirement of being "skinny," to receiving instructions to tuck their "large" derrieres under, and to "force" an erect spine. Conversely, African dancers have learned that dance movements do not have priority over a dancer's natural body type, shape or posture. Instead, technique and movement tends to yield to the weight, movement style, and "wisdom" of each individual's body.

When asked to consider and describe the best, most beautiful, or their favorite African dancer, each interviewee referenced a composite of dancers' mind, body and spirit. Not only was the slender body or uniformity of American contemporary dance of no import here, but the extreme polarities - individuality and aura - were celebrated. Three dancers comment:

"When I look at a ballet company, I think of uniformity, and I think that as an audience member, I'm supposed to. Everyone is supposed to look the same way, have the same lines, same costumes, and it's beautiful. That's part of the beauty of ballet. But part of the beauty of [African dancers] is that, although we're doing the same step to the same rhythm at the same time, we see everyone's individuality… [African dance] is an expression of God and that is something you can truly see in our community. In witnessing a group of dancers do the same step, you see all of the individual beauty, people's own divine energy, all at the same time." –African Dancer of 20 years.

"A person could be fit and pretty and dancing perfect by every standard but if, when they dance, there's not a light on inside, I wouldn't say that they're dancing beautifully. On the other hand, someone could be considered to be unattractive to all of America, but when they dance, you see this aura of just pure beauty, you see them smile and how [the dance] makes them feel, even if they're not hitting [the moves] exactly like the teacher demonstrated, they are dancing beautifully. I've seen it across cultures, I've seen Japanese women do it, Latino women do it, all in African dance classes, and what you see when they dance [is] a release and a pleasure. These are great African dancers." –African Dancer of 22 years.

"I love to see big women dance because they understand their bodies and know how they need to move to be efficient in executing the steps. It's a lovely thing," –African Dancer of over 20 years.

While agility, stamina and general fitness were also mentioned as important aspects to *stage* performance, the best dancers are, according to these women, those whose inner joy, divinity, and mind / body / spirit are actively engaged.

Spirituality, Healing & Health

"There are ways that we try to grow spiritually and move things in our lives, and it has dawned on me that we can't do these things without dancing. God expresses individually through each of us, through dance, so in order to grow and move forward in our lives we must pray, we must meditate, and we must dance," African dancer of over 20 years.

Thanks to an abundance of health magazines, online medical journals, and medical "experts" on any given news cast or talk show, it is generally understood that stress is *the* primary cause of illness and dis-ease in the United States. Stress, according to a variety of credible online sources, is a state of mental, emotional or psychological strain. And, while it is indicated that some stress may be considered "good" because it motivates some people to stay focused and alert, "bad" stress or stress-related illnesses seem far more common. Stress is widely known to negatively affect one's physiological, physical and mental health, including the onset of cancer, heart disease, and diabetes, as well as aching muscles, restless sleep, short-temperament, irritability, alcoholism and drug abuse, depression, and more.

Further, according to the Office of Minority Health, a subdivision of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Black women are 34% more likely to die from breast cancer than non-Hispanic White women, two times more likely to die from diabetes, experience higher rates of high blood pressure, and obesity, and are 20 times more likely to die of AIDS. Fortunately, data in this project reveals that African dance is a viable stress reducer and an integral part of leading a healthy lifestyle.

All of the interviewed dancers affirm that African dance participation is a source of creating and/or maintaining mental, physical, and emotional health. They explained clearly and explicitly that African dance is a priority, an integral part of their lives while expressing their "need" to dance. They each explain that traditional African dance specifically, is critical to their livelihood and that dance classes *must* be in close proximity to their residence; that their physical and mental health, temperament, and emotional stability depend on it. In a country where stress is indiscriminately indicated to be the cause of approximately 95% of all diseases and illnesses, an obviously overwhelming statistic, it becomes critical to life and livelihood, to determine, access and apply stress reducers, particularly for African American women, who are suggested to have a higher likelihood to acquire just about any undesirable health condition than non-African American counterparts.

When I asked dancers what they would do if all African dance classes within a 50 mile radius of their homes were shut-down, five out of six dancers expressed that they would seriously consider relocating. The sixth dancer said she'd resort to the home videos of African dance instruction, which she's acquired from her dance teachers over the years, and that she would have to "make something happen". For example, she would create opportunities for dance teachers and drummers to teach classes – even if only a series of temporary workshops – in her area. One dancer, a furniture store owner, looked me directly in the eyes and confided that the question alone aroused "total melancholy". The correspondent shock on her face, the sag in her shoulders, and her concise response immediately caused a momentary energetic shift that I could *feel* – the energy which permeated our interview space went from exciting and welcoming to weighted and saddening.

All dancers find that African dance classes provide a space for spiritual rejuvenation; a space in which she may both witness and experience personal freedom and empowerment. Interestingly, spirituality and freedom were inextricably linked in interviewees' responses, as though freedom is a product of spirituality, and spirituality is a product of doing African dance. It seems then, that African dance offers a space where personal freedom may be materialized. While two dancers describe attending African dance class as "going to Church", data in this exercise reveals that, during class or in performance, most of these women experience some "divine" union between body and drum, between movement expression and percussive poly-rhythm.

Whether they attribute the experience to a "stress relief," a "letting go," or a "balancing out" of day-to-day concerns about work, family and life in general, dancers' descriptions of what draws them back to dance classes year after year is the opportunity for total surrender, release, and self-authorized license to dance – to move – with abandon. The sense of freedom and surrender that dancers describe might be loosely compared to the visceral experience of what a Christian refers to as "catching the spirit" or "holy ghost", or what Filipino *Ipat* ceremonialists register as getting to the "trance" state. Dancers do not claim to have been overcome or taken over by some outside entity, deity, or spirit, but what they do describe is an arrival at a very keen awareness of a divine, liberated and euphoric self, where the dancer is effortlessly at her best, most loved, most realized and unapologetic.

Gender & Sexuality

Data in this study also showed that African dance allows dancers a freedom from sexual repression. Congolese and Senegalese *sabar* dance styles and classes in particular, are shown to: 1) offer a platform on which these women may confidently display their sensuality and sexuality without feeling as though they might be (mis-)judged, objectified, or violated, and 2) give them a sense of confidence and agency over their bodies, fostering a healthy relationship between her mind, body and sexuality.

Historically, as columnist Lexis B poignantly argues, it has been virtually impossible in the eyes of mainstream America for Black women to be simultaneously sexual *and* be respectable. She argues:

"The promotion of the notion of the hypersexual black woman has been used for centuries to justify the rape and abuse of black females from slavery through the times of Jim Crow. As a defense against this horrible cultural portrayal, many black women over the years have retreated from any sexual display to hide behind an asexual veneer. It was better to be seen as somewhat unattractive if efficient, than to possibly give fodder to the idea that black women are the insatiable vixens that the mainstream sought to cast us as. This strangulation of African American female sexuality has been a burden and a curse for a number of years. The freedom for black women to be sexual beings, while being seen as human and worthy of respect, is a relatively new phenomenon," -Lexis B, *Clutch Magazine.*

Another example of this strangulation of African American female sexuality among social scientists is the story of Sara Baartman, "the Hottentot Venus," (dir. Zola Maseko, 1998; Holmes, 2009) who was taken from Cape Town, South Africa in 1810 and brought to London for her body – namely, her large derriere – to be exploited via display at freak shows. Despite her body being nothing out of the ordinary among her people, the Koi Koi, and presumably other African women, Europeans focused on her buttocks, which was "abnormal" as compared to European women. Her body thus became the site for scrutiny and ridicule as well as contemptible medical and scientific research about African female sexuality.

When asked if their sexuality was expressed, inhibited, or otherwise impacted by African dance classes, each dancer immediately referred to Congolese and Senegalese *sabar* dance styles in their responses. Many Congolese dances require the rotation, gyration, and popping of the hips, and *sabar* seems to be performed best when dancers exude a degree of flirtatious mischief. Accordingly, both styles require a certain level of dancer-confidence within her possession and expression of the sensual and feminine; and by extension, confidence and comfort with her body and ideas about sex. A woman's ability to access her sensuality, to "turn it on and turn it off" as one dancer puts it, is seen as healthy and empowering among the six dancers. Two women share that their sense of self-confidence and sexual agency - which was boosted in dance classes - transfers beyond the class setting and into their personal and social lives.

Further analyses suggests that, while some Congolese and *sabar* moves may denote flirtation, it does not necessarily suggest an invitation to have sex; and when it *does* suggest sex, it does not denote promiscuity. Instead, the dancers agree that this and other traditional African dance movements give women license to celebrate their bodies in all of its forms and functions, affirming her fertile and creative powers as well as her physical beauty and capacity for pleasure.

Moreover, five out of six dancers revealed reciprocity of self-love in African dance; that, while some dances increased their sense of agency of their bodies, learning to celebrate their bodies in turn, allowed them to become better dancers.

Four dancers refer to an overall *process* of growth in their ideas about sexuality, as a result of taking African dance classes. While one dancer says (and another echoes) that she has always danced "with [her] whole body, women parts and all", four noted a gradual process of acceptance and comfort with pelvic gyrations and exerting the sexual energy seemingly required to perform Congolese and *sabar* steps, respectively. While one dancer admits that she did not immediately recognize any sexual connotations of Congolese movements, the others admit that they immediately linked pelvic rotations to sexuality. They were reluctant however, to fully integrate ideas of sex and sexuality into their movements while learning the dance techniques. Instead, they shied away from linking their minds to their bodies; from engaging thoughts of their bodies' sexual regions while they learned dances which required them to engage those very parts.

Five out of six dancers shared that, prior to learning Congolese and *sabar* dance, they had grown accustomed to repressing their sensuality and sexuality in public spaces as a way to protect themselves from being misjudged, stereotyped and/or violated. Data in this project suggests that dancers endured a process of refining their internal dialogue about femininity, which eventually allowed them to dispose of the guilt, shame, and/or discomfort which they previously associated with suggestive sexual energy exerted in public.

A healthy relationship to sex and sexuality, the birth educator suggests, is an integral step in nurturing a healthy relationship to one's self. She explains that sexual repression blocks the birthing chakra (also known as the sacral chakra) and leads to a disruption of one's divine, creative and fertility powers.

She notes that, in order to acknowledge, accept and celebrate being a woman and womanhood, a woman must include a celebration of her body - how it looks, how it feels, and how it moves. She emphatically links the rotating hip movements of Congolese dances to an honoring of the birthing chakra, which is known to promote vitality and strength and generate creativity, passion, and sexual energy. Not only has African dance allowed her to be "in [her] body", but it has allowed her to acknowledge and affirm the power of her body, including the creativity inherent in her birthing chakra. "My body has power, both in the beauty and the strength of it," she asserts. "Black women's bodies are meant to move like this and it's OK. As a matter of fact, not only is it OK, but it is necessary."

Conversely, one dancer admits that she is often annoyed by some dancers' overt and uninhibited expressions of sexuality in dance class. She suggests that some women tend to hyper-sexualize most, if not all of their movements in an attempt to gain attention from male drummers. She is concerned that this behavior perpetuates the stereotypes that she and other dancers have been so careful to avoid falling into.

Further, the data analyzed from the interviews in this study suggests that non-African American dancers' and drummers' presence in dance classes causes an energy shift – what once seemed a private space among some African American women, easily becomes public and "unsafe" when non-African Americans are amidst. The presence of White drummers, one dancer suggests, "taints" what is in one instant, a safe and nurturing space, turning it into a restrictive and even "contaminated" one. She makes it clear that feeling restricted is not born of intimidation or an inferiority-complex, but rather an annoying reminder that once again, her expression of sexuality may cause "others" to misjudge, misunderstand, and stereotype her and/or Black women as a whole. She clarifies that it is not her *ability* to feel free from sexual repression that is diminished in the presence of "others", but her *willingness* to do so.

Overall, the six dancers I interviewed agree that Congolese and *sabar* dance classes are spaces in which they tend to express sensual and sexual energy and movements in a way that reads to others as a *part* of their wholeness as human beings, and *not* in a way which purports them to be sexual objects. Moreover, these women report that the African dance community has allowed them to establish a sense of agency over their bodies. The presence and participation of non-Black dancers and drummers does tend to disrupt one dancer's feelings of freedom during dance class, but nevertheless, this generally safe-feeling space allows them to exhibit and celebrate woman's sexuality, sensuality and femininity with minimal fear of judgment, ridicule, or degradation.

The Hair I Wear, The Skin I'm In: A Participant-Observation

My interview questions and findings have addressed the African American African-dancing body, mind and spirit, and related concepts of race, gender and sexuality. I asked dancers to discuss surface topics such as their favorite dancers to more personal questions, requiring dancer to be vulnerable and reflective of herself and her experience within Oakland's African dance community. What I will address next however, is a more external analysis of this community; my participant-observation.

As discussed previously, Desmond (1997) argues that the body is a site for social, political and cultural protest. A valuable observation then is the inherent standard of beauty which tends to exist among African American women who participate in African dance forms. These standards break the boundaries of mainstream and pop culture, which recycles the notion that skin lightening, straightened hair, hair extensions, and an hour-glass figure are ideal.

Having been an active part of this community for fifteen years, I continue to witness first-hand the diverse bounty of physical beauty within the African American sub-culture of African dancers. In addition to wearing African-inspired fashions and African fabrics and clothing not commonly sought after in mainstream America, African American women who study African dance tend to topple the very definition most widely-accepted as "beautiful." While they (we) tend to wear very little make-up in and outside of dance classes. I often run into or meet with other dancers who literally *radiate* inner and outer beauty, having applied little more than skin moisturizer and a lip balm to their faces. While this information may seem insignificant at first read, it bears reminding that the nation's $49billion cosmetic and beauty industry (n.p., IBIS World, 2013) is known to have a lofty influence on women – on our spending habits, our self-image, and the way we view other women. For African American women then, who are readily seen as the American substandard in all sociocultural categories and including beauty, it is a significant act of protest to exude confidence – and beauty – in a manner which has not required the use, over-consumption, and/or application of the very products purported to improve our appearance.

Similarly, I have observed the hairstyles of African American women. In addition to relaxers and weaves, many African American women at the Malonga Center tend to embrace "natural" hairstyles, such as cornrows and braids, twists, locks, shaved heads, and natural kinks and curls. One dancer shared that it was "a no-brainer" to transition out from wearing permanent relaxers when she started dancing because, she declared, "you will sweat out your perm within three seconds of [African dance] warm-up!" This observation is *not* made to place the value of one hairstyle against another in a case for beauty or authenticity among Black women. However, with the popularity of actor/comedian Chris Rock's recent documentary, "Good Hair," which discusses among other things, how relaxed or weaved hair is *the* predetermined standard for Black women in Hollywood (and by propagandized extension, in Black communities), it warrants mention that among African dancers, relaxers and weaves are not typically worn nor are they viewed as a hairstyle *standard*.

Instead, African American women who study African dance tend to reject altogether, mainstream's common hashtags of beauty and demonstrate that in our culture, a variety of styles is typically worn, accepted, and understood to be uniquely and yet equally, *beautiful.* Again, it is important to cite even these more surface social markers of cultural identity, pride and resistance if we are to thoroughly dismiss those paradigms and ideologies which are relentless and thorough in their pursuit to degrade, dismiss, disarm and dehumanize us.

Conclusion

African American women who are African dancers are shown to acquire long-lasting, quality friendships and a network of community resources among other Black women. African dancers acquire a healthy body- and self-image and are more inclined to reject the mainstream standards of beauty and fashion by embracing their more natural beauty and creating and expressing alternate styles. All interviewed women cite African dance participation as a viable tool for stress relief and to balance their emotional and mental well-being when coping with the challenges of day-to-day life. The cultural art form has also allowed them to become more spiritually fulfilled and rejuvenated, and experience an overall sense of well-being. Further, African dance participation heightens their sense of power, control and agency over their bodies and minds as they enjoy the freedom from sexual repression and ideas of guilt or shame often associated with sexuality and sensuality. Overall, African dance is shown to organically centralize opportunities for an expanded sense of cultural identity, pride and self; to nurture a dignified sense of community and belonging; and to promote self-love, Black-love, and sisterhood among the African American women who commit to its study and practice.

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Delina Patrice Brooks and colleagues at Youssef Koumbassa's Annual Camp Fareta in 2010 (photo by Kelly Riggio)

Delina Patrice Brooks and classmates at Youssef Koumbassa's Annual Camp Fareta in 2010 (photo by Kelly Riggio)

Delina Patrice Brooks in class at Youssef Koumbassa's
Annual Camp Fareta in 2010 (photo by Kelly Riggio)