

## **Dancing Between Two Realms: Sacred Resistance and Remembrance in African American Culture**

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*Embedded in a global Black consciousness and spiritual power, dance is a cultural expression that demonstrates and legitimates a universe operating in sacred terms and a site of spiritual memory and resistance. Adapting to the adverse conditions in America, Africans wielded spiritual culture as an ontological imperative. Through dance, Africans in America established familiar and intelligible patterns to preserve their identities and ancestral heritage, expressed their beliefs and values, and related to others within the circle of community as well as to those external to the circle. This paper seeks to highlight the living dynamic of African-derived belief systems grounded in dance practices and the intersections of Black existentialism and resistance in these sacred enactments. I argue that dance allows Black people as a collective to defend their sacred existence, repair and control their bodies, and project their futures. To advance these assertions, I blur the lines between the sacred and the profane and examine forms of popular culture dances, using Beyoncé's half-time performance at the Super Bowl 2016 and her video "Formation," to trace Black ontology and the sacred fractal patterns requisite for spiritual transcendence.*

*Keywords: dance, memory, resistance, resistance aesthetics, Black ontology, collective practices, coded language, African diasporic culture, African American expression*

We  
Who have nothing to lose  
Must sing and dance . . .

Langston Hughes, "The Black Dancers"

To fling my arms wide  
In some place of the sun,  
To whirl and to dance  
Till the white day is done.

Langston Hughes, "Dream Variations"

One nation under a groove  
Gettin' down just for the funk of it  
One nation  
And we're on the move  
Nothin' can stop us now

Parliament Funkadelic, "One Nation Under a Groove"

## The Call

Michael Gomez reminds us that to understand the process of African American culture, “[I]t is essential to recover the African cultural, political, and social background, recognizing that Africans came to the New World with certain coherent perspectives and beliefs about the universe and their place in it.”<sup>1</sup> A people’s worldview exists without reference, but as reality, lived as part of the cultural socialization residing in actions, writing, speech, gestures, ritual, or other phenomena. It is non-doctrinal and is first-level discourse necessary for group survival. That is to say, it provides the nucleus of their being, the rationale for determined action and self-defense against some external threat. Early in their contact with the brutalities of oppression, dance became a primary mode for Africans<sup>2</sup> to maintain a separate cultural reality from the aliens who abducted them. From dances performed on deck to ensure their arrival to the shores of the Americas in commerce-ready physical condition, despite tight-packing and inhumane treatment as captives stowed in the hull of the ship, to dances to highly improvised movements of popular culture, African people have used their bodies as vessels of memory holding on to their cultural codes. Beyond geography, culture endures.

In his depiction of the Middle Passage in *Roots*, Alex Haley describes the Africans’ attempt to create community as they began to decipher unknown languages. He writes:

The steady murmuring that went on in the hold whenever the toubob were gone kept growing in volume and intensity as the men began to communicate better and better with one another. Words not understood were whispered from mouth to ear along the shelves until someone who knew more than one tongue would send back their meanings. In the process, all of the men along each shelf learned new words in tongues they had not spoken before. . . . [T]he men developed a deepening sense of intrigue and of brotherhood. Though they were of different villages and tribes, the feeling grew that they were not from different peoples or places.<sup>3</sup>

Here, Haley suggests that this pan-African interlocution allows Black people from distinct groups to emerge as a New World African people and constructs the foundation for collective and cultural resistance. In this passage, he reiterates the notion that historical trauma forced Africans to reach across disparate geographic, ethnic, linguistic, and political borders to not only express a sense of shared suffering and shared historical consciousness, but to begin to conceptualize some sense of unity. The formation for community replicated across temporal and geographical

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<sup>1</sup> Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 4.

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this study, I am defining “African peoples” as a confederation of various nations of people captured and brought to the western hemisphere. Additionally, I am using the term “African” in its broadest sense to include all people of African descent regardless of national origin. Nell Irvin Painter argues that being “African” Americans is part of a New World identity. “Naming people only by the continent of their origin and ignoring their ethnic identity is a consequence of distance in time and space.” Nell Irvin Painter, *Creating Black Americans: African-American History and its Meanings, 1619 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Alex Haley, *Roots* (New York: Dell, 1976), 185–86.

borders articulated, according to Davis, “a coherent cultural identity that could offer meaning in a seemingly meaningless world.”<sup>4</sup>

Diedrich, Gates, and Pedersen remind us, “The Middle Passage thus emerges not as a clean break between past and present but as a spatial continuum between Africa and the Americas, the ship’s deck and the hold, the Great House and the slave quarters, the town and the outlying regions.”<sup>5</sup> Embedded in a global Black consciousness and spiritual power, dance is a cultural expression that demonstrates and legitimates “important modes of comprehending and operating within a universe perceived of in sacred terms.”<sup>6</sup> Fundamental to that sense of sacredness is the idea that the material and phenomenal world is endlessly affected by unseen powers.<sup>7</sup> This spatial continuum includes temporal ideas of *Hantu* within a Ba Kongo frame, where time coheres with space like an ouroboros, an inseparable web of time and space conjoined.

This paper seeks to highlight the living dynamic of African-derived belief systems grounded in dance practices and the intersections of Black existentialism, resistance, and sacred enactment. I argue that the history accompanies the dancer in the performance. The body of the dancer is self-authorizing, a self-determining effort on full throttle to reassemble and repair itself. Sterling Stuckey argues in *Slave Culture* that the vernacular forms of culture, found in art, music, and dance reveal a deeper African spiritual consciousness. Patterson and Kelly see diaspora as “both process and condition.”<sup>8</sup> The process, which is always in the making, is situated in the condition housing the intersection of race and gender hierarchies. A Diasporic manifestation, dance is foundational to both process and condition of identity formation including the products or cultural activities rooted in a black ontology as Sartre advances in *Being and Nothingness* as individual consciousness and relational consciousness. Victor Anderson argues in *Beyond Ontological Blackness* that ontological blackness delimits individuality and thwarts the spiritual idea of transcendence. Anderson reads ontological blackness as “the blackness that whiteness created.”<sup>9</sup> He takes exception to blackness being essentialized; like Gates and others he believes these types of cultural representations are forms of idolatry that must be liberated from their particularization. Rodriguez and Fortier maintain that “[t]he *power* of cultural memory rests in the *conscious* decision to choose particular memories, and to give those memories precedence in

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<sup>4</sup> Andrea Davis, “Rearticulations, Reconnections and Reconfigurations: Writing Africa through the Americas,” in Naana Opoku-Agyemang, Paul E. Lovejoy, and David V. Trotman, eds., *Africa and Trans-Atlantic Memories: Literary and Aesthetic Manifestations of Diaspora and History* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2008), 276. In the preface of *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, Chernoff asserts that the fundamental aesthetic in Africa is participation. He notes, “without participation there is no meaning.” Illustrating the importance of dance to music, he says, “When you ask a friend whether or not he ‘understands’ a certain type of music, he will say yes if he knows the dance that goes with it. The music of Africa invites us in the making of a community.” John Miller Chernoff, *African Rhythm and African Sensibility: Aesthetics and Social Action in African Musical Idioms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 23.

<sup>5</sup> Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Carl Pedersen, eds., *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 56.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>8</sup> Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley, “Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World,” *African Studies Review* 43, no. 1 (April 2000): 11.

<sup>9</sup> Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*. (New York: Continuum, 1995), 13.

communal remembrance.”<sup>10</sup> Morrison notes this resistance to essentialisms, especially race. In “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” she asserts:

When blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as “race,” biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it. . . . It always seemed to me that the people who invented the hierarchy of “race” when it was convenient for them ought not to be the ones to explain it away, now that it does not suit their purposes for it to exist.<sup>11</sup>

Anderson dismisses this type of reified blackness, remarking “when race is made total, the ontological blackness is idolatrous, approaching racial henothism.”<sup>12</sup> His fears align with the type of white-created texts of blackness totalized in the white imagination. The 1935 feature film “Princesse Tam Tam,” a Pygmalion-inflected story that stars Josephine Baker as Alwina, *femme sauvage* and petty thief with an impulse to dance exemplifies his concerns. She is taken to Paris tutored to master the language, manage a graceful walk, and demonstrate social manners consistent with European standards. However, she unravels from her previous decorous behavior when she hears the drums and can’t resist their lure. Succumbing to the drums, she dances, revealing her “true” identity. Following the discovery, she returns to Africa, the “Dark Continent,” the land of the drum and dance. The final shot of the film, a close-up of a donkey eating the cover of a book titled *Civilization*, signals at once the end of culture and the end of the film.

Also, in the 1972 novel *Mumbo Jumbo*, post-modern writer Ishmael Reed pens a story of dance fever, the pandemic called Jes Grew that causes concern. Also a construction of black essentialism, the carriers, descendants of those who were brought to America to pick cotton, must be stopped. In response, the government launches a campaign to stop it from threatening civilization, by printing thousands of posters that command, “No dancing.” The contagion originates in New Orleans in Congo Square where black bodies left to their own devices danced without restriction during the antebellum south. In *The Dance in Place Congo and Creole Slave Songs*, George Cable describes Bamboula, one of the dances of Congo Square. He writes:

Now for the frantic leaps! Now for frenzy! Another pair are in the ring! The man wears a belt of little bells, or as a substitute, little tin vials of shot. . . . And still another couple enter the circle. What wild—what terrible delight! The ecstasy rises to madness; one—two—three of the dancers fall—bloucoutoum/boum—with foam on their lips and are dragged out by arms and legs from under the tumultuous feet of crowding newcomers.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Jeanette Rodriguez and Ted Fortier, *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith, and Identity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 12 (emphasis in original).

<sup>11</sup> Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,” The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, delivered at the University of Michigan, Oct. 7, 1988, <https://tannerlectures.utah.edu/documents/a-to-z/m/morrison90.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 15.

<sup>13</sup> George W. Cable, *The Dance in Place Congo and Creole Slave Songs*, (n.p.: Faruk von Turk, 1974, 7.

Similarly, in *Mumbo Jumbo*, the symptoms of the plague include howling, speaking-in-tongues, dancing to the drums—all threats to civilization. The dancers must be stopped. The suppression campaign begins with posters commanding “No Dancing.”<sup>14</sup> For the dancers, Jes Grew is an anti-plague that enlivens the host instead of robbing them of power. In this multi-media, interactive novel, Reed stakes a claim for a black ontology. In these extra-narrative forays, he uses definitions and other insertions to make the case that to dance is to be fully human. In *Mumbo Jumbo*, Reed employs a discursive literary stylistic, and cites Meerloo, in *The Dance: from Ritual to Rock and Roll, Ballet to Ballroom*:

Dance is the universal art, the common joy of expression. Those who cannot dance are imprisoned in their own ego and cannot live well with other people and the world. They have lost the tune of life. They only live in cold thinking. Their feelings are deeply repressed while they attach themselves forlornly to the earth.<sup>15</sup>

This idea advances transcendence through the ontological blackness that creates Jes Grew as a cultural phenomenon. Black existentialism is rooted in cultural memory—the insistence to remember to remember.

Although the aforementioned works are fictive renderings, the idea of the Black dancing body as savage, mark the irreconcilable black difference reflective of contemporary critique of black cultural production. To illustrate, Beyoncé Knowles’ Super Bowl 2016 half-time performance of “Formation” ignited a maelstrom of commentary consistent with “Princesse Tam Tam’s” fetishization of the Black body and the fear of the moving without permission described in Reed’s satire, *Mumbo Jumbo*. Giuliani’s response is similar to the reaction to Black dance, and the judgment about Black bodies. Referring to the performance, Giuliani opined, “I think it was outrageous.” He stated, “The halftime show I thought was ridiculous anyway, I don’t know what the heck it was. A bunch of people like bouncing around and doing strange things. I actually don’t even know why we have this.” Beyoncé’s dance, and homage to Michael Jackson, the King of dance, and the 50th anniversary of the Super Bowl was a statement of collective remembering and cultural reinforcement.

Beyoncé’s dancers wearing black and donning black berets performed a dance of memory and demonstrated how much of the present is rooted in the *past*. Rodriguez and Fortier note that transformative historical experiences define a culture, even as time passes and it adapts to new influences.<sup>16</sup> Their dance was at once an homage to the Black Panthers, a praise dance to the martyrs, George Jackson, Fred Hampton, Mark Clark and other victims of state violence: Amadou Diallo, Sean Bell, Oscar Grant, Troy Davis, Lamarley Graham, Trayvon Martin, Jordan Davis, Renisha McBride, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, and many other Black people in recent times including the victims of the Katrina disaster.

Rooted in actual events, cultural memory is activated by symbolic expression. Beyoncé’s dance was a form of reparations, a way to restore the body from the assaults of intergenerational

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<sup>14</sup> Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York: Scribner, 1996), 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>16</sup> Rodriguez and Fortier, *Cultural Memory*, 11.

poverty and health care disparities, which place Black people disproportionately in the highest percentiles for life-threatening illnesses, mass incarceration, psychic assaults of racism and police brutality, food deserts, and a bankrupt educational system that educates Black people to work against their own interests in service of forces of state, actions that present an impossible history. In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth explains the role of history and trauma, stating, “If PTSD must be understood as a pathological symptom, then it is not so much symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history. The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess.”<sup>17</sup>

Rodriguez and Fortier argue, “The deeper the abyss of crisis is, the greater becomes one’s connection to cultural memory and to past generations.”<sup>18</sup> The authors argue that cultural memory connects people; it is “blood calling out to blood.”<sup>19</sup> Defining the collective nature of cultural memory, they assert:

Cultural memory at the collective level is simply there waiting to be recovered in our songs, our rituals, our ceremonies, our stories, or through other mediating elements. The difference between the personal and the collective level is this: personally, the individual discovers his or her cultural memory through crisis, and collectively, the individual recovers his or her cultural memory through songs, rituals, ceremonies, and other mediating forms.<sup>20</sup>

The performance of dance liberates the dancers from the constraints of the marginalized self, allowing entrée to the center of being. Outside the group, those who objected read the body as contentious as it signed Africa’s enduring power, its flexibility, and its vitality. At odds is the moving Black female body, self-defining and self-signing its blackness in gestures and formation. I read the idea of formation not only as a construction or configuration, but also, as foundation. This foundation inscribed in dance movements, rooted in the Black experience, the oral traditions of the blues, jazz, and a plethora of stylistic sensibilities rendered a hip hop motif that was/is at once secular and sacred. Here the idea of formation connects to the foundational ideas of ontological blackness spinning around the navel of self to commemorate and celebrate insistent being.

For this essay I use the four aspects of cultural memory espoused by Rodriguez and Fortier to delineate dance as a form of cultural memory. They propose that cultural memory is a memory that (1) liberates from oppression; (2) provides a medium for transmission of that memory; (3) informs the emotions of generations; and (4) unites a people through time for a common cause.<sup>21</sup> I argue that these particularities are sites of memory that have resuscitative powers to assist the individual and community to experience anamnesis. Concerning anamnesis, Plato argued that these extra-sensory memorates reflect a continuous web of meaning shared beyond lifetimes and beyond the body. Like the Eucharistic reflection of the Last Supper, Christ’s invective to “Do this in remembrance of me,” commemorated during the communion

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<sup>17</sup> Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Rodriguez and Fortier, *Cultural Memory*, xii.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

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

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

ritual of Christian churches, this reiteration and recovery through dance creates transcendence and elevation through memory. Wright’s comments in “Blueprint for Negro Writing” discuss this idea of a common core of blackness that arose from the shared experiences of blackness, which can have transcendent qualities. He writes:

Let those who shy at the nationalistic implications of Negro life look at the body of folklore, living and powerful, which rose out of a common fate. Here are those vital beginnings of a recognition of a value in life as it is lived, a recognition that makes the emergence of new culture in the shell of the old. And at the moment that this process starts, at the moment when people begin to realize a meaning in their suffering, the civilization that engenders that suffering is doomed.<sup>22</sup>

In the realm of Richard Wright’s Black existentialism, one’s own tradition trumps other cultural forms for liberation. In *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, Aimé Césaire invokes the particularities of Black dance. He writes:

Rally to my side dances  
You bad nigger dances  
To my side dances  
The carcan-cracker dance  
The prison-break dance  
It -is-beautiful-good—and legitimate-to-be-a nigger-dance  
Rally to my side dances.

This entreaty to dance is Césaire’s attempt to repair the ruptures and relieve himself. Dancing is a way to disrupt the forces that deny Black humanity. In this invocation, dancing is a way to resist and to build. It exults Black folks to do their “bad nigger dance,” and to do their feel good about being Black dance. These injunctions mobilize and create the ritual space to move from the trauma of oppression. At the same time, it builds remembrance, a way to remember that binds Black people together. Larry Neal, a Black Arts Movement critic, notes this tension in Black cultural studies. He remarks:

There is a tension within Black America. And it has its roots in the general history of the race. The manner in which we see this history determines how we act. How should we see this history? What should we feel about it? This is important to know, because the sense of how that history should be felt is what either unites us or separates us.<sup>23</sup>

I advance that this history is a collective documentation of African people in America, a lesson in memory to bind Black people through shared experience. Amos Wilson discusses the deleterious effects of forgetting:

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<sup>22</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Valerie Smith, eds., *Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Vol. 2 (New York: Norton, 2014), 127.

<sup>23</sup> Larry Neal, “And Shine Swam On,” in Larry Neal and Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), eds., *Black Fire* (New York: William Morrow, 1969), 639.

Simply because we choose to forget a traumatic event, simply because we choose not to learn a traumatic history that may make us feel ashamed, does not mean that that history is not controlling our behavior. Simply, because we don't know our history, and may not of heard of it, does not mean that the history does not control our behavior.<sup>24</sup>

Dance positions the community as a space of restoration for the dislocated, the neglected, and the dissociated. This self-reflexive, self-defining, and self-determining agency is rooted in remembrance within the circle of community. In the circle, each participant remembers something worth bringing to the present from their collective past. These memories help them to resist the disintegration and fragmentation of identity demanded by oppressive forces. One of those cultural elements foundational to the Black experience, dance endures as a site of a powerful source of memory and self-authorizing narrative. In "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," Zora Neale Hurston's response to music conveys recovery and the reparative nature of body expression. She writes:

This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen—follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself. I yell within. I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeeeooww! I am in the jungle and living the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something—give pain, give death to what, I do not know.<sup>25</sup>

Hurston's reaction is juxtaposed to her white companion whose response is to remain motionless. Her return to Africa with strong emotions is a journey she must take towards the past to be well in the present. She reads the sign and is afforded a coded access to its power.

Diasporic performance using the concentric circles of rhythm—the call and response—from sound to movement inform Black aesthetic, spiritual, and cultural expression, a dialogue between movement and song. In this way, music embodies the belief systems and cultural matrices particular to a people. In contexts of oppression and challenges to the African identity, people create to engender unity.<sup>26</sup> In *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, Malidoma Somé notes that energy from the spiritual plane must be brought to the physical plane. This is achieved through the use of gateways—where the physical realm meets the spiritual. In Africa, as elsewhere, ritual behavior is a way of communicating with the divine, for the purpose of changing the human situation.

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<sup>24</sup> Amos N. Wilson, *The Falsification of Afrikan Consciousness: Eurocentric History, Psychiatry and the Politics of White Supremacy* (New York: Afrikan World InfoSystems), 34.

<sup>25</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Nellie Y. McKay, eds., *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (New York: Norton, 1996), 1010.

<sup>26</sup> Hip hop as a unifying language is evident in contemporary hip-hop culture blasting in major African cities from Dakar to Dar es Salaam, from Accra to Addis Ababa, and performed in music videos on cable from Cape Town to Cairo. The grammar of the body and the beats of hip-hop culture are articulated like the drum beats making Diop's words about cultural unity resonate deeply within the cipher. It is a pan-African language.



In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, that space is the Clearing where Baby Suggs performed the ring dance in the sunlight. This “unchurched preacher” led “every black man, woman and child” to the “Clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the woods.”<sup>27</sup> Similar to experiences in Africa where sacred groves were dwelling places of individual deities and the loci of other supernatural beings, the Clearing represents the space for Africans to repair the ruptures of the past using rhythm to free their bodies from the trauma imposed by enslavement’s limited opportunity for mobility. Commanding the men to dance, the women to cry, and the children to laugh. Morrison writes, “In the heat of every Saturday afternoon she sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees.”<sup>28</sup>

Additionally, cosmologies refer to memory at the cosmic level—that is, what the universe remembers and how that memory is shared across creation. As Nkira Nzegwu suggests, this idea of trans-spatiality allows us to know things in different ways and suggests a spiritual epistemology and ontological deliberations. In “The Break,” Thomas argues:

There are collective subjectivities and individual imaginative landscapes at stake in the formation of diasporas. Diaspora shapes the body that finds itself, or faces the task of finding itself, in sudden traumatic motion (think Transatlantic Slave Trade, Middle Passage, colonialism, genocide, refugees). The motion intrinsic to diaspora means the imaginative horizons are perpetually shifting, that the subjective, conceptual aspects of diaspora are as significant as geographies and material practices.<sup>29</sup>

Dance in the diaspora serves as a spiritual chiropractic aligning these shifting energies, or in American racial and political politics, oppression that remains the changing same. Because of the ways in which dance engenders collective unity, dance repairs the damage done in these assaults to the psyche, while reformulating the self.

Supplemental to these axiological considerations of unity, Linda James Meyers suggests that African people also employ epistemological formations determined by an awareness of symbolic imagery and rhythm that extend identity to multi-dimensionality. Dance disrupts the objectification of Black people and empowers them to input the cultural and spiritual codes necessary to defend their existence, record their history, and project their future. Re-enacted in these dance performances is the Kongo notion of *simba simbi*, which translates, “hold up that which holds you up.” The ultimate statement of inter-mutuality, *simba simbi* iterates the circle as the major cosmological idea.<sup>30</sup> Represented in formations reflective of Bakhtin’s dialogical exchange, these fractal patterns of culture reiterate the shared context of Black subjectivity. The circle/sphere adds dimension to the line as it envelops it. The sphere is multi-dimensional, and it

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<sup>27</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 87.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>29</sup> Valerie Thomas, “The Break,” in Rebecca Walker, ed., *Black Cool: One Thousand Streams of Blackness* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2012), 57.

<sup>30</sup> I employ the term “cosmology” as the body of conceptions that enumerate and classify the phenomena that compose and order the universe as well as the norms and processes that govern it. Accompanying these conceptions are embedded myths and other collective representations.

is curved. Sacred time is not “past” because it is not part of a lineal construct. The ancestors live in the present, and the future lives in us.<sup>31</sup>

Those who were brought captive to this land of the Americas prevailed, preserving their identities and ancestral heritage through dance. Using the drum, Africans tapped out familiar and intelligible patterns, key patterns, motifs, and symbols. Answering the call, dance renewed the spiritual and psychic energies needed to endure oppression. Even when the drum was outlawed in South Carolina, after the 1739 Stono Rebellion, in Charleston, with the passing of the Negro Act of 1740 in South Carolina and the 1755 Georgia Slave Codes,<sup>32</sup> there was no disruption. Realizing the necessity for unity, Africans supplemented the missing contents of home space and recovered meanings in those spaces or breaches.

Robert Farris Thompson extends the idea, adding that the break restores coolness, the balance, reason, sanity, and gentle character. Everything is possible in this break, the self, a space for restoration, improvisation, and the freestyle, a traditional motif in African music.<sup>33</sup> Valerie Thomas remarks about the break being able to inspire “possibilities and improvisations.”<sup>34</sup> Also available in these interstitial spaces is the ontological principle of *Nommo*, a Bantu sacred term, which means the power of the spoken word to create reality. Armed with the power of their *Nommo*, Africans waged a cultural resistance and maintained a spiritual and cultural connection with Africa and its attendant values. Essential to Black culture is the spoken word transmitting important information for cultural continuity.

These rhythms of resistance helped distinct groups of nations to emerge as collective new-world African people. Realizing the necessity for unity, Africans supplemented the missing contents of home space and recovered meanings in those spaces or breaches. In this place where Black people were forbidden to beat a drum, blow horns, bird feathers, cow horns, or conch shells they maintained the sonic rhythms of Africa by tapping their feet, patting juba, playing clap games, and versing spoken word. Bid whist and domino tables, barber shops, beauty parlors, churches, women’s clubs, sororities, fraternities, and lodge halls are archival spaces for cultural mnemonics. In the Black signifying tradition, participants repeat what has been said before and things that are new to keep the circle moving.

A type of mnemonic in multiple meters, collective dances are the repositories for the living memory. The attempts to destroy Black dance included edicts against African dancing, specifics of how steps could be performed (no crossed feet). The dancing did not stop. Fabre notes the indispensability of dance in its ceremonial capacity, a way to cement shared beliefs and values. She writes, “In the cults honoring the gods or the ancestors, dance was a way of

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<sup>31</sup> Marimba Ani, *Yurugu: An African-Centered Critique of European Cultural Thought and Behavior* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press), 1994, 60.

<sup>32</sup> Louisiana was the only state in America where Africans could legally play drums. In all other states playing drums was outlawed, since the beats were coded languages—insider language that others outside the circle of culture people were not privy to understand. The Bamboula, a Kongo-inspired dance as well as other circular dances were formulated in Congo Square.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music* (New York: Periscope Press, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Thomas, “The Break,” 56.

mediating between the godly and the human, the living and the dead.”<sup>35</sup> The danced body communicated with and embodied spirits and stored memory. Dance is a tale of memory, a battle between amnesia and total recall while challenging ownership of the body and its brutalization. Dance, as a self-constructed, self-determining, self-authorizing cultural performance that communicates the group ethos, or *Ubuntu*. In dance, this idea of *Ubuntu* triangulates space and time, creating sites of the sacred. Thompson notes that West African dances are “talking dances.”<sup>36</sup>

Once recovered, the body stores these memories for use in order to access control over spiritual and material wellness. Dancers are able to find satisfaction in the body at the present moment to incorporate acts of resistance. Cultural agency is achieved through the recovery of memory disrupting external forces who attempt to control the body, the production of the body, its labor and delivery. At the foundation of the circle dance are cultural aesthetics—impulses of memory. Dancing out of their own epistemic remembrance prevents one from being lured into amnesia and cultural death. Dancers not only communicate with spirits, but also can impersonate and incorporate them through the repetition of specific body movements.<sup>37</sup> Performing the ritual dance through the repetitive movements of tracing and retracing the four quadrants of the circle, dancers recover sacred time and re-claim their nationhood and sense of personhood. Mircea Eliade explains that sacred time is not only recoverable, it is also unchanging, and perpetual.<sup>38</sup> Wole Soyinka notes the role of culture in fighting against ideological imposition, reminding us that culture is a primary target of invading forces. To counter annihilation, the oppressed must hold tenaciously to the key patterns of their culture.<sup>39</sup>

Fanon suggests that the inauthentic life that people of color are forced to live can only be negotiated by the dream state or in the direct practice of their own culture. Finding refuge in the performance of expression of resistance in the form of creation, singing, dancing, cooking, sewing. Rodriguez and Fortier note that religious ideology also constructs pathways for resistance and ensures self-preservation.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, culture has to survive, if the people are to live. Cultural survival is both biological and ideological. In this way, even with the absence of the drums, the body became the percussive terrain to beat out rhythms and codes unrecognizable to their captors. Africans danced these cosmologies encoded in visual and tactile memory, deep in the recess of steps.

### **Congo Square**

Double consciousness is not possible when dancing to the drums. Dance is the spiritual correlate to the poignant sorrow songs Du Bois so eloquently presented in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. In order to navigate harsh environments, brutal physical and mental abuse, the

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<sup>35</sup> Genevieve Fabre, “The Slave Ship Dance,” in Maria Diedrich, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Carl Pedersen, eds., *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33.

<sup>36</sup> Thompson, *Aesthetic of the Cool*, 1.

<sup>37</sup> Fabre, “The Slave Ship Dance,” 33.

<sup>38</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, translated by Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt, 1987), 69.

<sup>39</sup> Wole Soyinka, “Theatre in African Traditional Cultures: Survival Pattern,” in Simon Gikandi, ed., *Death and the King's Horseman* (New York: Norton, 2003), 89.

<sup>40</sup> Rodriguez and Fortier, *Cultural Memory*, 11.

body had to remember. Dancing is a way of remembering to remember. Housed in those coils of dance memory are visual and kinetic codes: modes of power production. Different than a Du Boisian Double Consciousness, dance drives the circle of time or concentric circles of community of both the living and the dead, which is best expressed in the Adinkra, *Sankofa* which considers nature's duality, self, community, and the notion of the most comprehensive order of things as ontological. The memories housed in dance are historical, emotional, and aspirational, "blood calling blood."<sup>41</sup>

In the early history of New Orleans, The Place Congo in New Orleans was resplendent with African people dressed in a riot of colors and cloth. During the week, the women may have been nannies, domestics, or sellers of produce, or seafood; the men may have been dockworkers, carpenters, blacksmiths, ordinary laborers, but on Sundays, they shucked off those anonymous identities and exchanged them for their national affiliations. The Lukumi faces marked with three vertical marks incised on their cheeks or in a slant on the jaw midway between the corner of their mouths and the ears spoke Yoruba, Mandingoes whose jet skin shone in the sun, conversed in Bambara with the tall Wolof from Senegambia whose language was mutually intelligible. The Fulani's high-pitched voices rang out in Pular. Those from Angola and West Central Africa shared the news of the day in one of the Bantu tongues: Kumbundu, Kikongo, or Chiluba. However, the most dominant voices in the square rang out in the Créole spoken by both the descendants of Haiti and those who had been natives of New Orleans for many generations. These transcultural exchanges provided space for corporate wellness and kept the bloodlines opened. Dancing and singing house the cultural values of a group and ritualize their corporate interests, especially in cases of annihilation and external threat to the group.

The center of the square was divided in fours and in each of the resulting quadrants a group of bare-chested drummers drummed. One envisions men with red cloths tied around their foreheads holding drums between their legs; others wearing straw hats sitting on wooden boxes playing the drums with their bare hands. Perhaps sticks resembling mallets, or two pieces of iron forged in a variety of shapes and thickness, produced a cacophony of sounds ranging from the peal of bells to the resonance of chimes and cymbals. Maybe younger boys held rattles, or oyster shells suspended from braided palm fibers. Concordant sounds echoed throughout the square as the men pounded out the primal codes and complex rhythms to invoke the African Gods. Matching the layered parcel of beats, the fervent dancers moved around the circle commemorating the power of stones, bloodlines, and memory. Africans assembled in the square to dance in their nation's language of movement—their body grammar dancing to the pounding drum rhythms, losing their bodies, to penetrating rhythms.

Dance iterates the notion of there being no survival without memory. Creating familiar and intelligible patterns of movement to preserve their identities and ancestral heritage, Africans fashioned a unique language, modes of expression, and creative performance. Evans describes New Orleans music as having been influenced by the idea of rhythmic cells derived from Africa via Cuba. These rhythms—habanera, tresillo, cinquillo, and clave and other rhythmic formulae— derived from Haitian Petro, Cuban Lukumi, and other African spiritual systems and

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 4.

reinforce a pan-African identity and connection.<sup>42</sup> Dance as a form of Sankofic<sup>43</sup> behavior stitches past time into a continuous arc of time repeating itself in fractal patterns indicative of its ontological vitality and change-making constancy. The emotionality of the rhythms opens up potential and moves the dancer to a place of strength and power.

Through the overlay of all time, the dancer is equipped to access the spiritual power needed for the crossing. This fluid space is a crossroads or a locus to generate a new thing, a third ontological space, a break where possibility exists. Remembrances of a cultural identity anterior to the “crossing” serve not only to fortify culture upon the initial arrival to the western hemisphere; they also persist as cultural essentials to ensure African people’s continued survival.

### ***Anatomy of a Circle***

These crossings continue in dance extending life. Moving the body past the strictures of European time with its linear focus, dance is a spiritual presence locating key memories using the Bantu notion of time. *Hantu*, an African unit of measurement, situates time and space as an indivisible whole insisting on continuities and perpetuities. Disrupting European notions of time, chronologies, periodization, and linear time, *Hantu* is enduring cycles/wheels of time emblematic of the Bantu notions of dams. In “Time in African Culture,” Pennington notes, “Time for Africans does not exist in a vacuum as an entity which can be conceptually isolated. Time is conceived only as it is related to events, and it must be experienced in order to make sense or to become real.”<sup>44</sup> Measured in major rhythms are concepts such as day and night, seasons, migration of animals, famines, and the movement of the heavens such as phases of the moon and eclipses and minor rhythms, living things of the earth such as humans, animals, plants, etc.<sup>45</sup> This formulation of time snakes alongside the culture through which African people have expressed their beliefs and values, related to others within the circle of community.

Thompson proposes that “To enter the circle was to enter deep blackness, to receive secret strength in contact with ecstasy.”<sup>46</sup> In this cypher, enslaved Africans established familiar and intelligible patterns to reserve and preserve their identities and ancestral heritage. Indications of this ancestral heritage are observed most notably in the spiritual practices of music, dance. Africans danced their circle dances signing the value of inter-subjectivity, mutuality, and interdependence, key features of the Bantu expression *umuntu umuntu nagabuntu*—a person is a person because of people.

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<sup>42</sup> Freddi Williams Evans, *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans* (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press), 2011, 37.

<sup>43</sup> The fundamental thesis of the Akan proverb and Adinkra symbol *Sankofa* asserts, “Return and get it.” The primary imperative in this symbol is to learn from the past and to bring those salient spiritual and cultural ideas into the present in order to strengthen one’s life and to insure an unbroken circle. Depicted both as a stylized heart and a bird that looks over its shoulder for elements of a usable past, *Sankofa* reflects the circularity of life and the mutual exchange between old and new, insuring the sacred spiral of time. In the spirituals, African people in America have sung, “My Soul Looks Back and Wonders How I Got Over” as a cultural remembrance of this principle.

<sup>44</sup> Dorothy L. Pennington, “Time in African Culture,” in Molefi K. Asante and Kariamu Welsh Asante, eds., *African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 131.

<sup>45</sup> John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Heinemann, 1991), 37.

<sup>46</sup> Thompson, *Aesthetic of the Cool*, 156.

Thompson calls the circle a “citadel of spirit and certainty, a medicine for continuity and protection.”<sup>47</sup> As Jahn notes in *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World*, “I is always a ‘we,’ and every I-statement includes a binding imperative,”<sup>48</sup> a way to be in the world from an African cultural sensibility. The legacy of dance created the sign of difference from their captors and helped Africans maintain a sense of unity as a counter to their captivity. As performative sites of spiritual memory and spaces of resistance, dancers perform sacred codes that define African spiritual identity allowing Black people to defend their existence, control their body, and project their future. These sacred rhythms and codes encompass a range of spiritual and aesthetic concepts.

This ritualized return to forever allows for continuous time consistent with the Bantu notion of *hantu*, which is time and space unified. Over time, bodies performed the dances their souls remembered, stepping between realms. Comparable to the mnemonic devices employed in traditional African cultures, each dance is a commemorative site where readers can participate in re-collecting buried knowledge to refortify and restore a sense of identity and cultural connectivity to the village—the community—the world of Black people. This world elides the realm of past and present, sacred and secular. Emerging from the continent of Africa, decks of ships, plantation circles, dances from the cakewalk, the Charleston, the Bamboula, Calinda, Lindy hop, jitterbug, hip-hop dancing, pop lock, Electric Boogaloo, nay nay to dabbin’ have galvanized Black people to remember.

Dance is what the body performs in order to reclaim those things forgotten by the dancer. This durable cultural identity is expressed in the proverb: The leopard only gets wet when it falls into the water; the water does not wash off its spots. Amiri Baraka advances that most of the attitudes and cultural characteristics can be traced directly to Africa and are integral to African identity.<sup>49</sup> Explaining the role of culture, Cheikh Anta Diop notes:

I consider culture as a rampart, which protects a people, a collectivity. Culture must, above all, play a collective role: It must ensure the cohesion of a group. Following this line of thinking, the vital functions of a body of African human sciences is to develop this sense of collective belonging, through a reinforcement of culture. This can be done by developing the historical consciousness of African and Black people so as to arrive at a common feeling of belonging to the same historical past. Once this is attained, it will become difficult to “divide and rule” and to oppose African communities one against the other (1976).

Beyoncé’s circle dance, a form of prayer, performed in the language of struggle, the language of success, the language of a people whose history in this country has been suppressed, but not surpassed. Maybe dance was her first consciousness, her first language. Using her body, she creates a space to recover lost codes of body performance to gather and generate power. Perhaps, derivative circle games and ring shout chants accompanied her childhood where circles of body performance were a GPS system used to triangulate her and tap into a deep and abiding communication with other Black people throughout time.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 156–58.

<sup>48</sup> Janheinz Jahn, *Muntu: African Culture and the Western World* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1961), 149.

<sup>49</sup> Amiri Baraka, *Blues People* (New York: Perennial, 1998), 7.

This is what the Bantu call *Ubuntu*. On the floor, whether it is the pebbled earth, or the waxed wood floors of gymnasias, and dancehalls, salons, jook joints, or basements, Black people dance. They have danced the electric slide, second line giving way to the spirit. Fraternity and sorority folks dance their cryptic steps in formation, break dancers spin in circles on hard earth or concrete.<sup>50</sup> Black people dance seeking the power of their ancestors to assist them in their current struggle. Dance as a collective ritual provides the renewal necessary to re-establish harmony among the living and those in the ancestral realm. A sacred medium, dance repairs the soul of the dancer and restores the self to equilibrium. These reparations are a manifestation of ancestral awareness and deep statements that have helped Black people to withstand. The circle dance is sufficient enough to explore as a leitmotif to make the case for spiritual reparation and ontological return. In *Slave Culture*, Stuckey notes, “Being on good terms with the ancestral spirits was an overarching conceptual concern for Africans everywhere in slavery.”<sup>51</sup> Removed from western constraints of time, one in which it is possible to end, Africans continued their ring dances and their jubas, worshiping their Gods from distant lands.

The circle dances, ring shouts are reenactments of the Kongo cosmogram, or *dikenga dia Kongo*, a symbolic depiction of the soul’s movement in a counterclockwise fashion signifying everlasting life.<sup>52</sup> Each ninety-degree turn represents the cyclical journey of the soul moving from birth to puberty, to maturity, to eldership, to begin the cycle of re-births again. The *dikenga dia Kongo* is structured in four parts, depicted as a circle intersected at the midpoint by two lines, one vertical and the other horizontal. The space above the line is the upper world and the physical world and below the line is the lower world or the spiritual world, the abode of the ancestors. The two intersecting lines form four quadrants epitomizing the four suns constructing

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<sup>50</sup> African American culture is evident in contemporary Hip Hop music blasting in major African cities from Dakar, to Dar es Salaam, from Accra to Addis Ababa and performed in music videos on cable from Cape Town to Cairo. The grammar of the body and the beats of Hip Hop culture resonate in the Black Diaspora and beyond.

<sup>51</sup> Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and The Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 43.

<sup>52</sup> The Kongo cosmogram, *dikenga dia Kongo*, is represented in many ways in African American material and performance culture. Robert Farris Thompson has documented the repeated influence in painting, quilt making, yard decorations, funerary art, performance styles, and body gestures. The repetition of this structure is a variant of the ring shout, a Kongo sacred dance that African people retained in America. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1984). Also see Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1983); and Robert Farris Thompson, *Faces of the Gods: Arts and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1993). In its re-codified form as a popular dance it is called the “electric slide” (a testament to its Kongo origins of which a sub-group of people are referred to as Ba Kuba (the people of lightning)). The dance consists of four 90-degree turns counterclockwise, which recreates the *dikenga dia Kongo* and signs the remembrance of the matrix of spiritual structure of the circle or 360 degrees of existence. Sterling Stuckey posits that the ring shout helped to consolidate Africans’ identity in America. See Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and The Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 12. It is significant that memorates were kept in musical and dance forms as symbolic modes of cosmic perception in the United States of America owing to the manner in which the particularly harsh conditions of American enslavement denied African people access to little other than their physical bodies. Since dance does not have a material artifact as the product, it allowed them to not be completely submerged by Euro-American concepts. Baraka, *Blues People*, 16. Dance is a major archival resource of African people and exists as “symbolic restatements of something sacred the history of something that may be remembered or forgotten.” E. Bolaji Idowu, *Olodumare: God in Yoruba Belief* (London: Longmans, 1962), 115. Also see Fabre, “The Slave Ship Dance.” Through the creation of sacred space, Africans re-presented belief systems using the body to inscribe the cultural worlds east and west of the Atlantic.

the journey of a human being on earth. It is a passage where energy exchanges in the middle creating triadic structures or crossroads of emancipation derived from the two given ideas joined at the center. This biodynamic process imparts new life at the intersection where oppression and resistance interact in order to strengthen sacred functioning.

Versions of this circle dance have been danced continuously, according to Stuckey. As a result of these two intersecting lines, four quadrants are formed epitomizing the four suns constructing the journey of a human being on earth. The participants begin the dance at the midpoint of the cross on the horizontal line dissecting the circle known as *kalunga*, the “balancing plane for all existence.”<sup>53</sup> As dancers move three steps to the right on the *kalunga* line, they journey toward *kala*, corresponding to birth, symbolized by the color black. From there they trace the *kalunga* line three steps to the left, arriving at the quadrant known as *luvemba*, which is characterized by the color white, representing the death of an individual. Executing this step prepares them to walk three steps backwards toward the southern axis into the realm of the ancestors to begin again at *musoni*, which represents beginnings, seeds, and the color yellow. From there, the dancers move three beats consisting of a pause at the *kalunga* line, one small step back retracing their steps toward *musoni* and one down, which is actually the northern axis, the space to collect the power at the zenith of the circle or *tukula*, the sun of maturity, signified by the color red.

Finally, the dancers make a counterclockwise turn to trace the circle again. The circle will be traced four times until they arrive at the same point again to complete/begin the dance’s symbolic journey. The dams of time described in each of the cosmogram’s quadrants are delineations within the cosmic realm. From a Bantu perspective, Bunseki K. Fu-Kiau asserts that nothing exists that does not follow the cosmogram.<sup>54</sup> These mythic symbols hidden in dance steps of the ring shout encircle and contain the spiritual ethos of Kongo-derived beliefs.<sup>55</sup>

This configuration also coheres with the Yoruba traditional notion of *orita meta*, or the sacred crossroads where energy exchanges between realms.<sup>56</sup> At the intersection sits Elegba, who guards the ingresses and egresses of time and chance. These opportunities at this sacred carrefour provide Black people with the ability to create solutions for the crisis at hand. The strong lean of the shoulders, or in Ki-Kongo language, *yekuka* and the deep knee bends, *fwokama*,

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<sup>53</sup> Fu-Kiau, Kimwandende Kia Bunseki, *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo: Principles of Life & Living* (Brooklyn, NY: Athelia Henrietta Press, 2001), 23.

<sup>54</sup> Fu-Kiau *African Cosmology of the Bantu-Kongo*, 27.

<sup>55</sup> By no means is this circle as a spiritual frame unique to West and West Central Africans. Native or First People of North America also used the circle as a major cosmological reference. At the height of a severe offensive launched by the U.S. Cavalry against the First Nation People, the spiritual leaders came together in response and adopted the Ghost Dance, a counter-clockwise circle dance. It was employed to engender wellness and the ethos of unity in order to endure external assaults. This dance of nations became a point of contention because of its power to unify the various nations of First People after the shared tragedy of Wounded Knee. Dancing and drum circles had been outlawed over time as external threats to the European’s expansion on their lands. Native religions, traditions, and practices were suppressed by declaring war on dancing as an affront to civilization and their conversion into the Christian faiths demanded by their oppressors. These suppressions were seen as prevention strategies to limit positive identity formation.

<sup>56</sup> For more information on the concept of the crossroads, see Will Coleman, *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African/American Ways of “Telling the Story”* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); and Wole Soyinka, *Myth, Literature and the African World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).



represent body movements that suggest the ring shouts performed on the plantation. Thompson explains:

In the classical religion of the Kongo, to bend down while circling is to traverse two worlds. When dancers “get down,” they surge with the spirit. When they stand up they move as themselves.<sup>57</sup>

This exchange of energies between both worlds coupled with the body movements of two hands on the hip, arms akimbo, or in Ki-Kongo, *vonganana* also called by Fu-Kiau, *pakalala* signals authority and challenge, a defensive move to protect Black being.<sup>58</sup> *Vonganana* is a modality to command the space round the individual; the pose protects the poser from harm. The close-up of Beyoncé’s daughter, Blue Ivy, dancing with hands on hip, is a confrontational pose called *vonganana*, which means to assert oneself and to take control. This gesture links her to the struggle of others that have come before her, insuring the circle of perpetuity. As a visual language, these diverse gestures empower the individual dancer and the community to resist constriction and maintain control of the body, rendering it free and self-authorizing.

### ***Fight the Power***

1989 the number another summer (get down)  
Sound of the funky drummer  
Music hittin’ your heart cause I know you got soul  
(Brothers and sisters, hey)  
Listen if you’re missin’ y’all  
Swingin’ while I’m singin’  
Givin’ whatcha gettin’  
Knowin’ what I know  
While the Black bands sweatin’  
And the rhythm rhymes rollin’  
Got to give us what we want  
Gotta give us what we need  
Our freedom of speech is freedom or death  
We got to fight the powers that be  
Lemme hear you say  
Fight the power

Public Enemy—“Fight the Power”

Kongo spiritual culture pervades the “Formation” video in this ontological fight. A montage of memories frames the dance of exultation and liberation. It begins with the voiceover of deceased rapper Messy Mya and a shot of Beyoncé on the hood of a car, which is half submerged in a large body of water, an analogue of the Kongo idea of the *bakulu*, or deceased ancestors, who continue to interact with the living. Residing below the *kalunga* line, the *bakulu*—or venerated ancestors—dwell under the surface of living waters as manifestation as well as

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<sup>57</sup> Thompson, *Aesthetic of the Cool*, 161.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

memory. Establishing shots include close-ups of gold-capped teeth, grills gleaming in a wide smile. Using the Kongo concept of *vezima*, or flash, as the major conceit of southern Black identity to indicate spiritual presence, *vezima* relates to spiritual interaction between the material and spiritual realms. Some of the manifestations of this light result in one being able to recognize his or her destiny or to have a moment of spiritual remembrance from past incarnations.

Thompson notes that the flash gleam can arouse the spirit,<sup>59</sup> represent this impulse of spirit, such as shiny, glitter, gleam, and gold. Fu-Kiau contends that the human soul is “a miniature sun.”<sup>60</sup> As such, people bring radiance in the form of light from the spirit world. Thompson reports that before the importation of mirrors, Kongo ritual experts used wing case charms constructed from the iridescent wings of a beetle. These charms were “something full of light, like water, that you can see through to the other world.”<sup>61</sup> “The idea of the glitter of the spirit fused with the notion of second sight through symbolized flight in order to expand the beyond—(*vila mu bangula bweno a ku mpemba*),” says Thompson.<sup>62</sup> Glittering objects and the embedding of spirit became fundamental to African cosmos since the shine “arrests the spirit with its light and hints of movement—to the other world.”<sup>63</sup> This reflection equips the person with spiritual energy to fight the oppressive forces and transcend the prevailing external circumstances.

When Beyoncé’s dancers are not dancing in circles or in intersecting lines of formation they are dressed in translucent and diaphanous white cloth, twirling umbrellas creating Kongo spinning circles, signing this spiritual transcendence and journey between the realms. This curation of cultural rudiments reflects the audacity of memory generated by the dance. Even the blue convertible car dances a counter-clockwise metal dance, its rims spinning and double signing the cosmogram and reinforcing the gleam. Created in the San Francisco Bay Area, this metal dance, called “Ghost Riding the Whip,” riffs on the creative energy of Ogun the Yoruba Orisa of metal and the primordial deity of creative destruction. The God of war in the pantheon of Orisa, Ogun represents transformation and spiritual technology as well as mediation to assist his devotees to cut through obstacles in their lives.

The fractal codes in the video reproduce African spiritual values: Mardi Gras Indians, marching bands, umbrellas, women fanning themselves, pictures of shot gun houses, and camera angles that recreate the crossroads in the center of the framed shots. Most African-created memory rituals such as marching bands have been absorbed into popular culture as casually as the Kongo gesture for wellness and wellbeing, *yangalala*, known as the global phenomenon of giving a “high-five.” Having been appropriated by those outside of the cultural circle, these memorates endure, re-signed and reclaimed in African body formation.

This reclamation is seen in the final scene of “Formation,” when a young Black boy offers resistance using dance technology. He is confronted by a phalanx of police dressed in full riot

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<sup>59</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, *Faces of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas* (New York: Museum for African Art, 1993), 57.

<sup>60</sup> Kimwandende Kia Bunseki Fu-Kiau, quoted in Thompson, *Faces of the Gods*, 49.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Farris Thompson, “Kongo Influences on African American Artistic Culture,” in Joseph E. Holloway, ed., *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 174.

<sup>62</sup> Thompson, *Faces of the Gods*, 174.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

gear representing the images that flooded the televisions at the height of the Black Lives Matter protests in Ferguson, Missouri following the murder of Michael Brown, and the Baltimore uprising after the death of Freddie Gray. His dance articulates the thesis of James Cone’s Black power theology, which is complete emancipation of Black people from white oppression by “any means necessary,” similar to Henry Highland Garnet’s idea of challenge, subsequently adopted as a liberatory strategy by Malcolm X. In this encounter—which has a potential for great tragedy—far outnumbered and outgunned, the young boy begins a slow dance of measured hand movements and coordinating body movements to prevail over the forces inimical to his existence. Using the sacred cells of rhythm, he creates power in the body, exercising agency and subjective control over his life.

At the conclusion of his dance, which by then has been ramped up in fervor, the police raise their hands in unison surrendering to the power generated by his dance. Here memory is understood, as Mieke Bal suggests, as a cultural phenomenon, an individual one, and a social idea.<sup>64</sup> Although an individual dancer, he is not alone. His dance links him with other Africans who have stood at the crossroads of life and death. He invokes the spirit. His victory stands as an homage to Black boys from Emmett Till to Tamir Rice and Black girls like Latasha Harlins of South Central Los Angeles and the four little girls at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama who did not make it. We are encouraged in the circle. In these dances between the realms—like those performed in brush harbors where Africans gathered to keep their bloodlines open, the shuffle steps of prisoners dancing their chains, girls sashaying in ring games, and the steps and leaps of Pentecostal parishioners matching their faith, we are encouraged to let the spirit have its way, the circle is alive and unbroken.

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<sup>64</sup> Mieke Bal, “Introduction,” in Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer, eds., *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 1999), ii.

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