

AFRICAN DANCE AS CULTURAL MEMORY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S
WRITING

by

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(Under the Direction of Barbara McCaskill)

ABSTRACT

This project analyzes the role of African dance as it functions as a site of cultural memory in African American women's literature by Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, and Toni Morrison. Although a tremendous amount of scholarship exists on the African American women writers who comprise this study, my dissertation is the first to examine their creation of scenes of African dance as a site of cultural memory. I seek to answer the following questions: 1) How does dance function as a site of cultural memory, what the French historian Pierre Nora refers to as "those persons, places and/or things in whom memory is crystallized"? 2) How do African American writers use scenes of African dance to consolidate knowledge? 3) How does African American women writers' use of African dance as affect the body of African American literature? 4) How does African American women writers' uses of dance differ from that of African American male writers? and 5) How does the construction of dance as a part of the African American vernacular tradition remap the cultural landscape of American literature? I assert that African American women, unlike their African American male or white female counterparts, share what Kimberle' Crenshaw calls intersectionality – being at least doubly marginalized by virtue of their status both as African American and as woman (209). As such, their bodies are at least twice marked as "Other," and they must locate, as

Virginia Woolf states, “a room of [their] own” (4) in order to weave their narratives into the traditionally white, male-dominated American literary canon. I offer representations of African dance as the space or room, if you will, in which African American women writers assert their voices. By recreating these sites, they claim a certain place of power in locales, such as “traditional” dances of West Africa, many of which employ dance as a means of communal bonding; they demonstrate the continuity of African cultural practices across the transatlantic slave trade into the New World; and they assert their own voices within the traditionally hegemonic American literary canon.

INDEX WORDS: African American Literature; Dance; Feminist Theory; Nella Larsen; Zora Neale Hurston; Sonia Sanchez; Ntozake Shange; Toni Morrison; Quicksand; Mules and Men; A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women; for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf; Song of Solomon.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my parents, Mr. and Mrs. John Phillip Krouse; my grandparents, Rev. and Mrs. J. D. Bolden Sr.; my aunt, Mrs. Veronis Hall; my uncle, Dr. Walter C. Bowie; and my extended family, Mr. and Mrs. Aubrey O. Page. Although they couldn't see me complete this journey in-person, I have their spirits guiding me along the way.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION	IV
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
LIST OF FIGURES	VII
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 LIMINAL SPACES OF PERFORMANCE IN NELLA LARSEN'S <i>QUICKSAND</i>	15
3 DANCE AS A "FEATHER-BED RESISTANCE" IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S <i>MULES AND MEN</i>	48
4 FROM THE MOTHER LAND TO THIS OTHER LAND: SONIA SANCHEZ'S A <i>BLUES BOOK FOR BLACK MAGICAL WOMEN</i>	72
5 A DANCE FOR MY SISTERS: NTOZAKE SHANGE'S <i>FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF</i>	105
6 CALLING ON THE SPIRITS: TONI MORRISON'S <i>SONG OF SOLOMON</i>	135
7 CONCLUSION	165
REFERENCES	170
APPENDICES	
A FIGURES 2.1A-2.3	200
B FIGURES 3.1-3.4	204
C FIGURES 4.1-4.2	208

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 2.1A: FRONT COVER OF “FROM SUN TO SUN” PROGRAM	200
Figure 2.1B: BACK COVER OF “FRON SUN TO SUN” PROGRAM	201
Figure 2.2: HURSTON DEMONSTRATING CROW DANCE.....	202
Figure 2.3: HURSTON’S PRODUCTION OF <i>THE GREAT DAY</i>	203
Figure 3.1: ARETHA FRANKLIN’S PHOTO ON ALBUM FEATURING “RESPECT”	204
Figure 3.2: SANCHEZ AND SONS.....	205
Figure 3.3: MINISTER MALCOLM X AND OTHER MEMBERS OF THE NATION OF ISLAM	206
Figure 3.4: HINDU GODDESS KALI	207
Figure 4.1: ORIGINAL BROADWAY CAST OF <i>FOR COLORED GIRLS</i>	208
Figure 4.2: “A LAYIN ON OF HANDS” FEATURING DR. FRED A SCOTT GILES AS THE LADY IN RED”	209

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Norton Anthology of African American Literature (1997), one of the most widely taught readers in the field, traces the origin of this particular body of work to a category the editors define as the African American vernacular tradition. This segment includes the performative type of expression unique to the earliest slaves brought from Africa to America in their pre-literature existence in a compulsory, English-speaking New World. *The Norton Anthology* defines the African American vernacular as “expression that springs from the creative interaction between the received or learned traditions and that which is locally invented, ‘made in America’” (3). These expressive forms include the secular work songs, spirituals, and folktales created among the earliest enslaved Africans on the southern American plantations, as well as the sermons, blues, jazz, and rap that developed from this foundation.

The editors of *The Norton Anthology* credit these expressive forms as the seedling of African American literature because they demonstrate African Americans’ earliest attempts to incorporate their African values with those espoused in America: namely, a cultivation of the English language and Christian doctrine. As a way of adapting to these ideals, enslaved Africans developed a language that was implicitly performative in its ability to demonstrate an adherence to New World constructs, while maintaining a system of values firmly rooted in their African heritage. For example, components of the African American vernacular tradition meld the compulsory English language and Christian doctrine with the polyrhythmic elements unique among many tribal communities in West African countries, from where most of the enslaved

Africans were forcibly removed to America, thus marking a process known as the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade along a route dubbed the Middle Passage.

Editors of *The Norton Anthology* include an audio disk to complement the section on the African American vernacular as evidence of the amalgam of polyrhythms and English literacy among African American expressive culture. Although this compilation is helpful to establishing the foundation of African American literature, it falls short of crediting dance as an outlet of expression for Africans both in their tribal communities and especially in America, where they were condemned and thought bestial for their ignorance of the English language, yet forbidden from learning to read and write it. As they did in developing other forms of the African American vernacular, enslaved Africans brought with them to America forms of their traditional dance practices and layered them with aspects learned in the New World, thus creating the previously alluded to “interaction between the received or learned traditions and that which is locally invented, ‘made in America’” (3), which characterizes the African American vernacular. For that reason, no discussion of the African American vernacular is complete without at least some mention of African American dance.

The previous statement is not intended to imply that no one has written about dance in literature. To the contrary, African American authors have often written about scenes of African dance as having some particular impact on their perception of African American creativity. For example, William Wells Brown describes a scene in which enslaved Africans engage in dancing, singing, and performing among themselves in *Clotel; or, The President's Daughter* (1853), possibly the earliest extant African American novel by a black man. Georgiana, one of the central characters in the novel, remarks, “It is from these unguarded feelings of Negroes that we should learn a lesson” (98). In his autobiographical novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored*

Man (1918), James Weldon Johnson recalls the “intricate cake-walk steps [, which have] taken up the time of European royalty and nobility” (812), despite generally being considered as “lower forms of art” devised by African Americans in the plantation South. Langston Hughes speaks, in his poem “Danse Africaine” (1922), of “[a] night-veiled girl / [who] whirls softly into a / circle of light [while] . . . the low beating of the tom-toms / stirs your blood” (1255). In his essay “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” (1958), Ralph Ellison alludes to the “Negro idiom songs, dance motifs and word play” (1542), as cultural practices of “projecting the future and preserving the past” (1547). Similarly, in his experimental novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), Ishmael Reed notes the Jes Grew epidemic, thought to originate in the Congo and characterized by a state of “uncontrollable frenzy,” in which people “were wriggling like fish, doing something called the ‘Eagle Rock’ and the ‘Sassy Bump;’ were cutting a mean ‘Mooche,’ and lusting after relevance” (2304).

What these passages have in common is that they reflect African American men’s attempts to “project the future and preserve the past” by focusing on the influence of African culture on the African American vernacular, in particular, and on American culture, in general. I endeavor to show how African American women writers use the same methods, namely by creating scenes of African dance, to insert their voices into a male-dominated canon. African American women writers are the inheritors of a legacy of African culture; and they use the same methods as those employed by the dominant male writers of their time to create a sense of agency and insert their voices.

My dissertation seeks to analyze the role of African dance as it functions as a site of cultural memory in African American women’s literature by Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake Shange, and Toni Morrison. Although a tremendous amount of

scholarship exists on the African American women writers who comprise this study, my dissertation is the first to examine their creation of scenes of African dance as a site of cultural memory. I seek to answer the following questions: 1) How does dance function as a site of cultural memory, what the French historian Pierre Nora refers to as “those persons, places and/or things in whom memory is crystallized”? 2) How do African American writers use scenes of African dance to consolidate knowledge? 3) How does African American women writers’ use of African dance affect the body of African American literature? 4) How does African American women writers’ use of dance differ from that of African American male writers? and 5) How does the construction of dance as a part of the African American vernacular tradition remap the cultural landscape of American literature? I assert that African American women, unlike their African American male or white female counterparts, share what Kimberle’ Crenshaw calls intersectionality – being at least doubly marginalized by virtue of their status both as African American and as woman (209). As such, their bodies are at least twice marked as “Other,” and they must locate, as Virginia Woolf states, “a room of [their] own” (4) in order to weave their narratives into the traditionally white, male-dominated American literary canon. I offer representations of African dance as the space or room, if you will, in which African American women writers assert their voices. By recreating these sites, they claim a certain place of power in locales, such as “traditional” dances of West Africa, many of which employ dance as a means of communal bonding; they demonstrate the continuity of African cultural practices across the transatlantic slave trade into the New World; and they assert their own voices within the traditionally hegemonic American literary canon.

As dance was the very first art form, I think it important to take notice of its emergence within the African American vernacular tradition and throughout African American literature. In

my dissertation, I present dance as a trope for how African Americans have engaged in a figurative dance while constantly negotiating their identity as Africans in America. This type of dance manifests itself in the theme of the tragic mulatto character, who is constantly moving back and forth between opposing points of interest: namely, his black and white racial backgrounds. This trope also emerges in African American folk culture, which represents African Americans' attempts to preserve their African heritage amidst white racist attempts to erase it. Sometimes, the trope of dance in African American literature signifies a figurative movement, as in a sense of coming together and moving forward; other times, dance illuminates its universality and power to communicate beyond a standard written language. As a part of the African American vernacular tradition, dance recalls specific African cultural traditions; it demonstrates ways in which African Americans have used their bodies express their culture, and how African American women writers have used the black female dancing body to subvert racism and sexism in America.

I situate my research among the more recent scholarship of African American women who examine the intersections of African American literature and/or culture and other expressive forms. For example, in literature, Farah Jasmine Griffin's *Clawing at the Limits of Cool* (2008) examines the jazz collaborations between Miles Davis and John Coltrane. In literature and drama, Soyica Diggs Colbert's *The African American Theatrical Body: Reception, Performance, and the Stage* posits elements of the African American vernacular tradition – including the blues, gospel, sermons, theatre, and dance – as distinct types of performance that are central to the study of African American literature. In history, Deborah Willis and Carla Williams' *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (2002) traces the history of visual representations of the black female body. In dance, Thomas F. DeFrantz's *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's*

Embodiment of African American Culture (2004) examines Ailey's use of the African American vernacular tradition in his choreography, and Brenda Dixon Gottschild's *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance* (1996) examines African cultural retentions in American dance forms. Notably, these works address interdisciplinary research interests, as does my dissertation. Moreover, despite the growing trend in cultural studies to embrace such interdisciplinary work, no one has yet to publish scholarly work that examines the intersections of African dance and African American literature. This is the vantage point from where my research enters into dialogue with other scholars.

I base my theory, in part, on J. H. Kwabena Nketia's premise that "[dance] can convey thoughts or matters of personal or social importance through the choice of movements, postures and facial expressions" (20). This phenomenon is most crucial to understanding the communicative power of dance. Nketia offers the following example:

When a dancer points the right hand or both hands skyward in Akan dance, he is saying, "I look to God." When he places his right forefinger lightly against his head, he means, "It is a matter for my head, something I should think seriously about, something that I must solve for myself." If he places his right forefinger below his right eye, he is saying, "I have nothing to say but see how things will go." When he rolls both hands inwards and stretches his right arm simultaneously with the last beats of the music, he means, "If you bind me with cords, I shall break them into pieces."

The preceding segment clearly demonstrates how African people communicate through dance and how dance functions as a cultural repository. Of course, in the above referenced section, Nketia is speaking specifically of observations unique to the Akan community of West Africa,

for dance and gesture do not exist in a monolithic form across the vast continent of Africa. Indeed, I point to Nketia's observations among a specific group of West African peoples to offer the scenes of dance in Hurston's, Shange's and Morrison's works as continuities of West African cultural practices, since the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade brought slaves to the New World from areas primarily along the coast of West Africa.

My methodology is based on the Afrocentric approach John Roberts uses in *From Trickster to Badman: The Black Folk Hero in Slavery and Freedom* (1989). Herein, Roberts asserts, "an Afrocentric approach to the study of black culture must focus on deep structural similarities, rather than superficial differences, between African cultures as the foundation of black culture-building in [America]" (10). Accordingly, Roberts begins each chapter with an analysis of shared structural elements of folk culture, particularly folktales in African communities. Thus establishing this African foundation of African American culture, Roberts traces the historical development of the folk hero image in African American literature. Similarly, I will examine deep structural similarities in dance practices among West African communities, as most African slaves in America came from areas along the Western region of Africa. From this foundation, I will trace the historical emergence, rather than the development, of African American women writers' use of scenes of African dance as a meta-narrative of cultural memory to connect with a fictive African heritage and remap the narrative structure of American literature. Roberts notes:

Africans in America, in creating a lifestyle and expressive forms supportive of culture-building, were influenced less by surface differences in what they experienced in the New World than by the concrete realities they faced on a day-to-day basis which facilitated

their clinging tenaciously to a value system both recognizable to them and alternative to that imposed on them. (13)

The sense of community that Roberts suggests emerged out of shared values rather than surface differences undergirds the sense of community that African American women writers have forged through both a literary tradition established by their predominantly male antecedents and the sense of empowerment they gained in moving beyond this tradition.

Among the Sande women in the Vai community of northwest Liberia and the coastal interior of southern Sierra Leone, dance helps to instill a sense of confidence and “is one area of life where women believe they are on an equal level with men” (*Music and Dance of Africa*). I submit that African American women writers form a similar community, doubly fueled by their recreating scenes of dance where women are empowered. I will evaluate works of multiple genres from three major periods in African American literature - the Harlem Renaissance (1919-1940), the Black Arts Movement (1968-1975), and Postmodernism—since literature of these periods distinctly celebrates the African cultural influences in America.

Chapter One will examine scenes of African-influenced dance in Nella Larsen’s novel, *Quicksand* (1928). In this novel, Larsen describes five scenes in the story in which dance represents the mulatto protagonist Helga Crane’s inability to integrate successfully within either her African American or European cultural groups. One particular scene in *Quicksand* depicts two black men “cavorting” on-stage in a juba-like minstrel performance. Based on Larsen’s description, I examine the way in which the juba performances emerge out of the Akan, Ewe, and Hausa community practices in Ghana, where the movement of the legs and feet plays an integral role in the musical rendition. Larsen’s scene also supports J. H. Kwabena Nketia’s explanation of the dance mode of drumming, one of the three modes of drumming, which merges

both music and dance as a repository of African culture. Larsen's focus on the male performance shifts the narrative focus to that which is twice female – once through her female gaze as author and then through the female gaze of the protagonist Helga Crane. Finally, this particular scene also recreates the nineteenth-century minstrel performances, in which white performers used burnt cork to blacken their faces and “cavort” on stage, holding up to ridicule African Americans' attempts to assimilate into a civilized American society. Contextualizing this performance through an African American female gaze yields Larsen a unique space in which she recreates a narrative of African American performance practices with a distinct African origin, but re-envisioned through an African American female perspective. Larsen strips the power from the black men “cavorting” on stage and upsets the negative stereotypes associated with such minstrelsy. As a result, her mixed-race heroine turns the table on such seemingly disempowering forces, because this scene actually helps Helga Crane to begin to connect with her African ancestry.

Another Harlem Renaissance writer who expanded the norms of African American literature is Zora Neale Hurston, perhaps the most popular female novelist during this period. As an anthropologist and folklorist, Hurston offers scenes of African dance recreated in an American context in her collection of folklore, *Mules and Men* (1935). In part one of her book, Hurston recounts the ring performances in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida, including the ring dances and performances of oral tales, or “lies,” which reflect an African influence in this, the oldest African American community. These performances retain elements of the ring, which indicate the strong sense of community in African culture. Kofi Agawu suggests that the outer space of the ring represents traditional cultural practices, as it signifies the community or family unit, which is generally responsible for teaching tradition, culture, and values. Agawu

juxtaposes the outer space of the ring with its inner space, which he contends represents modernity – as opposed to tradition – because within the ring, people may dance in forms that represent both traditional and modern influences. This is as much a reality in Postcolonial Africa as it is in America, where Hurston examines the conflation of European and African influences on the ring dances in her African American hometown of Eatonville, Florida.

In Part Two of *Mules and Men*, Hurston recalls the dance rituals associated with the voodoo ceremonies in which she participated in Haiti. The trance-like state associated with these ceremonies is akin to the cultural practices Ruth Stone observed among the Kpelle people in Liberia. Stone notes a phenomenon she calls “inner time,” which comprises a dancer becoming “possessed” by the spirit with whom he or she may be communing or summoning during the performance. As Stone states, “Inner time and outer time blend in a very delicate balance to create an event that involves both human and, sometimes, spirit participants” (91). Hurston narrates scenes of spiritual dance in similar ways that reflect the pervasive influence of African dance in the Caribbean and in America. Her ability to go beyond her male counterparts in the Harlem Renaissance in incorporating African and African American folklore in America set her in a category unparalleled by any writer – male or female, black or white – during her time. These scenes comprise Chapter Two.

Chapter Three examines the Black Arts Movement and the poetry of Sonia Sanchez. Her collection of poetry, entitled *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women*, was published near the end of the Black Arts Movement, in 1974, yet it reflects the major Black Arts Movement goal of creating an art form that is accessible to the African American masses. African American poets generated direct, straightforward verse styles to reach black people and reflect the push toward black cultural nationalism and community-building during the Civil Rights

Movement. Section One of “Present,” from Part Three of the collection, offers a simple lyrical verse format that celebrates the lives of ordinary African American women. Her verses reflect the importance of black women embracing their African history in order to understand their significance in the African American community. Through their fearless dancing, the strong African American women Sanchez portrays mirror the Jerusema, a Zimbabwean dance symbolizing military strength and nationalistic pride as well as a demonstration of their collective survival skills (Welsh Asante 113-14).

Following the Civil Rights and Black Arts Movements, black women’s Postmodern Literature articulates a remapping of African American cultural and social history. African American authors during this period embrace, rather than eschew, the era of slavery as a way of understanding the present, and they increasingly incorporate African belief systems and rituals deemed central to African American life. African American women writers made tremendous gains during this period. The combined efforts of the Black Arts Movement and Women’s Liberation Movement yielded a proliferation of African American women’s writing in all genres of literature, including literary theory and scholarship. African American women writers articulate the complexities of African American culture and history through increased explorations of relationships, sexuality, and spirituality in families and among friends. In their literature, an homage to one’s African cultural antecedents illuminates another dimension of the complexities of African American relationships. Two African American women’s Postmodern works that employ the dance motif to explore this dynamic are Ntozake Shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* and Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*.

Chapter Four examines Ntozake Shange's dramatic choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf* (1977). The community of women that Shange creates in this play demonstrates various experiences along their journey into womanhood. They represent the types of rites of passage or initiation dances, which Welsh Asante suggests "often represent a child ['s] or adolescent's transition or even transformation into womanhood" (42). The rites of passage that Shange illumines mirror the initiation rituals unique to the secret Sande society among the Vai women of northwest Liberia and southern Sierra Leone in West Africa. This so-called secret society teaches culturally proscribed gender roles to women through music and performance. Likewise, Shange's *for colored girls* offers a series of vignettes in which women representing the various colors of the rainbow – plus brown – perform, through dance and verse, stories of their triumphs and trials, pleasures and pain. Just as the Sande women "learn special choreographed dances and dance dramas" (11) to demonstrate their readiness to enter womanhood, Shange's "girls" deliver carefully orchestrated dance movements, which collectively render a drama detailing a sense of communal resistance and survival.

Shange's *for colored girls* also reflects the Gelede ritual among the Ketu-speaking people of West Africa. Benedict Ibitokun states, "Gelede . . . concerns itself with guaranteeing social peace and harmony, and it is a female affair" (18). In "Sechita," one of the scenes in *for colored girls*, the lady in green portrays an Egyptian goddess / [who] . . . "made her face like nefertiti . . . performin the rites / the conjuring of men conjurin the spirit" (25). This scene recalls elements of the Gelede festival, which, according to Ibitokun, recognizes "womenfolk," the elder women within their society, for their strength and wisdom. Shange offers tribute to the legacy of strong African women who have bequeathed this strength to their African American women successors.

As a result, she elucidates both an intercultural and inter-generational relationship among women, crystallized through dance. As well, Shange uses black women dancers to subvert an historically hegemonic English language and to foster a sense of peace and harmony through a community of women bound together by their African heritage and their need to speak themselves into existence.

Also published in 1977, Toni Morrison's prize-winning *Song of Solomon* comprises Chapter Five. Morrison's novel tells the story of a mythical group of African slaves who developed the ability to grow wings and fly home to freedom in Africa. Morrison investigates this myth by exploring the relationships between their family members in America. In one representative scene, Milkman, the protagonist of the story, returns to the family home in Shalimar, Pennsylvania, where he encounters children holding hands and playing in a circle. This scene functions as dance metanarrative, which reconnects Milkman with his family's African heritage. It recalls Agawu's discussion of the significance of the ring in African culture, wherein, he reminds us, the ring represents a sense of kinship, or community, and cultural continuity. From Milkman's perspective, the children's circular formation indicates the smaller peer community they have established within the larger Shalimar community. Their circle represents the continuing of an African legacy since the children unknowingly sing the story of Milkman's ancestral roots. Secondly, this children's game supports Agawu's assertion that the children's game songs, recreational dances, and healing ceremonies constitute what he refers to as a "potentiality" of cultural resources. The concept is particularly insightful given the fact that this scene posits the children's activity as a game song in which Milkman's family legacy is preserved; a recreational dance in which the children re-enact African cultural ring dances; and a

healing ceremony in which they impart the knowledge of Milkman's heritage, which heals him and transforms, by extension, the otherwise fragmented members of Milkman's family.

Finally, my dissertation endeavors to show the unique way in which African American women writers use dance both to expound upon the tradition of African American literature and to establish new ways to interpret dance as a motif, specifically in African American women's writing. For example, I have endeavored to analyze how forms of dance expand the concept of the African American vernacular as repositories of African culture in America. As well, I hope to show that African American women writers use the dance motif in ways significantly different from their male counterparts. Notably, they use the image of black female body to turn the tables on historical images of black woman as object. They use their craft to create a space in which the black dancing body becomes a symbol with the power to communicate beyond the strictures of an historically Eurocentric language and, consequently, one that resists erasure of the enduring African cultural legacy in America.

CHAPTER 2

LIMINAL SPACES OF PERFORMANCE IN NELLA LARSEN'S *QUICKSAND*

Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) builds upon the study of the color line, which emerged during the preceding periods of Reconstruction (1865-1877) and its aftermath in the works of writers such as Charles Chesnutt,¹ W. E. B. Du Bois,² and James Weldon Johnson.³ *Quicksand* presents a fictionalized autobiography in which Helga Crane, the protagonist, like Larsen, grows up as the only black member of a white family (Rampersad 1065). Larsen, like Helga Crane, was born to a Danish mother and a father of African descent. Within this novel, Larsen (1893-1964) develops scenes of dance that function as a metaphor for Helga Crane's mixed-race ancestry and as a vital source of cultural memory.

In fact, descriptions of African American dance in *Quicksand* alienate Helga Crane from both her European and African heritages precisely because they represent, to her, aspects of her African heritage. That is to say, throughout the novel, Helga Crane marvels over the black dancing bodies in her midst, and these very sights make her aware of just how alien she is to her

¹In *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, editor William Andrews credits Chesnutt as "the first writer to make the broad range of African American experience his artistic province and to consider practically every issue and problem endemic to the American color line worthy of literary consideration" 523 (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997). Chesnutt biographer Sally Ann Ferguson notes, "[Chesnutt] qualifies his literary campaign and almost exclusively focuses on the concerns of color-line blacks – those like himself who culturally and, more importantly, genetically could straddle America's racial divide" 4 (*Charles W. Chesnutt: Selected Writings*. Ed. Sally Ann H. Ferguson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001).

²In the Introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), John Edgar Wideman recalls one of Du Bois's most noted statements, "The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line." The "problem of the color line," according to Du Bois, includes the concept of "double-consciousness," a term he introduced to convey the reality that African Americans' identities are defined less by their own will than by the attitudes and opinions of white people with whom they interact; Du Bois called this type of existence "living within the Veil" (3). (Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

³Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) is a fictive autobiography in which the protagonist represents "the problematic exploration of racial identity and the conflicted relationship of 'the Negro' to 'the American' in the twentieth-century African American's struggle for self-definition in the United States" 767. (Johnson. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. New York: Penguin Books, 1990. Rpt. in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay, General Editors. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997).

Danish maternal ancestry as well as her African American paternity. Consequently, the types of performances that Larsen creates suggest Helga Crane's liminal status as a tragic mulatta, who never is completely able to establish a sense of belonging to either aspect of her heritage. Indeed, her mulatta standing emphasizes her liminal status, and the dancing bodies she witnesses remind her that she, too, is constantly dancing between the black and white worlds that continually elude her.

Larsen's use of dance as a metaphor for her mixed-race heritage mines the cultural milieu during which she wrote *Quicksand*. In fact, Langston Hughes and Milton Meltzer portend, "While it may have seemed as if 'all Harlem was dancing' in the 1920s, for most Harlem Renaissance artists, 'dance served primarily as a symbol of the times'" (91). Moreover, a major characteristic of this post-World War I environment was a fascination with what cultural critics, such as Nathan Huggins, call "primitivism," a belief in the superiority of a simple way of life, close to nature, rather than an industrial society, which America had so quickly become.⁴ For many whites following World War I, African Americans were no longer pariahs; rather, as they attempted to make sense of the chaos of the "wasteland" that T. S. Eliot claimed an industrial America had become,⁵ many whites looked to Harlem blacks, since their response to this modernization of America was not one of fear, but of celebration for having found an oasis, a community of like-minded individuals in Harlem and carved outlets for their creative yearnings. These desires took root in publishing houses, recording studios, and dance halls that welcomed -- indeed sought -- the basal expression of the African American Negro.⁶ Consequently, the appeal

⁴See Nathan Huggins's *Harlem Renaissance* for a discussion of America's fascination with "primitivism" following World War I (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁵See T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), in which he laments the chaos and decay that have befallen a modern post-War America.

⁶David Levering Lewis details the literal and figurative migrations of African Americans, southern and eastern Europeans, and West Indians from the periphery of America's geography to New York, the center of mainstream

of Harlem as a “cohesive ghetto,” (Dowling 140) beckoned the likes of artists such as James Weldon Johnson,⁷ Langston Hughes,⁸ Zora Neale Hurston, and Nella Larsen,⁹ all of whom joined the ranks of this group whom Hurston affectionately called the Niggerati.¹⁰ Accordingly, whites depended upon blacks in Harlem for lessons on how to survive the chaotic jungle that America had become, and Harlem’s blacks depended upon whites for both an audience and the capital for their creative expression. Consequently, the black dancing body represents both an outlet for creative expression and the object of white interest.

These very forces create “the mixedness of things,” which Larsen biographer Thadious M. Davis defines as “the savagery under sophistication that [Carl] Van Vechten captured in his 1926 novel *Nigger Heaven*.”¹¹ In this chapter, I examine the dance scenes in *Quicksand* as a metaphor for “the mixedness of things” that foster Helga Crane’s internal struggle with elements

America. (See Lewis. “Introduction.” *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*. New York: Penguin Books, 1994. Print.)

⁷In *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Johnson writes about his decision to leave Jacksonville, where he had lived for a short while, after “the factory at which [he] worked was indefinitely shut down” and move to New York City, which he describes as “the most fatally fascinating thing in America . . . constantly enticing thousands from far within, and tempting those who come from across the seas to go no farther.” (Johnson. *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. Rpt. in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie Y. McKay, General Editors. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997.)

⁸In his fictive autobiography *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes recalls the African American lure of the Cotton Club, where whites “were given the best ringside tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers – like amusing animals in a zoo.” (Hughes. *The Big Sea, An Autobiography by Langston Hughes*. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1940.)

⁹In the introduction to *Quicksand*, Deborah McDowell relates, “For a brief time after her nurses training [at Lincoln Hospital Training School for Nurses in New York, Larsen], was superintendent of nurses at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Unable to tolerate its stifling atmosphere, she left after only a year and returned to New York.”

¹⁰Tiffany Patterson writes, “In Hurston’s view, the Niggerati sloughed off this culture in their striving for upward mobility.” (Patterson. *Zora Neale Hurston and a History of Southern Life*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005.) Dowling articulates that this Niggerati to which Hurston refers includes, “the first wave of 1920s Harlem intellectuals, particularly W.E.B. Du Bois.” (Dowling. *Slumming in New York: From the Waterfront to Mythic Harlem*. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007. 141.)

¹¹Carl Van Vechten was a white photographer, literary critic, novelist, and Harlem Renaissance patron. In Nathan Huggins’s *Harlem Renaissance*, he says of Van Vechten’s 1926 novel, *Nigger Heaven*: “[The novel] tried to make two points. In the first place, it wanted the reader to know Harlem as a social microcosm of New York City. The reader had to reject definitions of the Negro as a type . . . Harlem was no monolith and the Negro fit no stereotype. Yet, at the same time, the reader was expected to accept the Negro as a natural primitive. Where he was true to himself, he was saved from civilized artificiality, and had preserved his mental health” (New York: Oxford University Press, 102).

of her African heritage, which threaten to surface, despite her air of sophistication resulting from her European ancestry.

Quicksand is essentially a picaresque novel, in which Helga Crane travels in search of some sense of belonging within either her African American or European cultural groups. Aside from Davis's biography of Larsen, extant scholarship on *Quicksand* elucidates various aesthetic tensions in the novel as representations of Helga Crane's internal tensions as the tragic mulatto. For example, Catherine Rottenberg examines the racial and gender tensions inherent in Helga Crane's search for identity, and Ann E. Hostetler examines the racial tensions that keep Helga Crane "begging" to belong either to her African American or her European cultural group.¹² Race, gender, and class converge in essays by Anthony Dawahare and Meredith Goldsmith. Both scholars agree that the accessories Helga wears to pass as white actually call attention to what the white people she encounters see as exotic.¹³ As well, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson and Pamela E. Barnett examine the tensions between the image Larsen conjures of Helga Crane as a visually evocative heroine and her far more complex identity as a tragic mulatta.¹⁴ Exploring more of the picaresque aesthetic in *Quicksand*, Anna Brickhouse¹⁵ analyzes the books Helga Crane reads as symbols of the places she resides along her journey, and Jeffrey Gray examines Helga's moving to Europe as her attempt to move away from the African American influences,

¹²See Rottenberg. "Begging to Differ: Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and Anzia Yezierska's *Arrogant Beggar*." (In *African American Review*. 41.1 (Spring 2007): 87. Print.). See also Hostetler. "The Aesthetics of Race and Gender in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*." In *PMLA*. 105.1. Special Topic: African and African American Literature (January, 1990): 35-46.

¹³See Dawahare. "The Gold Standard of Racial Identity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*." (In *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. 52.1 [Spring 2006]: 22-41. See also Goldsmith. "Shopping to Pass, Passing to Shop: Bodily Self-Fashioning in the Fiction of Nella Larsen." (In *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 2001.).

¹⁴See Cherene Sherrard-Johnson's essay, entitled "'A Plea for Color': Nella Larsen's Iconography of the Mulatta." (In *American Literature*. 76.4 [December 2004]: 833-869. Print.). See also Pamela E. Barnett's essay, entitled "My Picture of You Is, After All, the True Helga Crane": Portraiture and Identity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*. (In *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 20.31 [1995]: 575-600. Print.).

¹⁵See Brickhouse. "Nella Larsen and the Intertextual Geography of *Quicksand*." In *African American Review*. 35.4 (Winter, 2001): 533-560.

which she deems “primitive” (“Essence” 257). Similarly, Amelia DeFalco and Irina Anisimova examine the tensions between modernism and primitivism, which keep Helga Crane constantly searching for an authentic sense of self.¹⁶ These latter two referenced scholars, as well as Cheryl Wall, draw striking parallels between Helga Crane and African American dancer Josephine Baker both in terms of their expatriation to Europe and the fact that both African American women were objectified by white audiences. Although I revisit some of the scholarship from DeFalco, Anisimova, and Wall in my analysis of Helga Crane when she travels to Denmark to live with her aunt and uncle, my analysis of dance as a metaphor for “the mixedness of things” that reinforce Helga Crane’s image as a tragic mulatta charts new territory in terms of existing scholarship.

As early as Chapter Two, during Helga Crane’s teaching tenure in Naxos, she observes the “multitude of students streaming into neat phalanxes preparatory to marching in military order” (12). This martial drill Helga witnesses functions as a metaphor of her experience in Naxos. The male faculty member, whom she describes as “resplendent” (12) in the regalia of an army officer, represents the regime of Dr. Anderson, principal of Naxos, the southern college for Negroes, located in a town of the same name. Helga thinks the school is “no longer a school. It was now a show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man’s magnanimity, refutation of the black man’s inefficiency. Life had died out of it. It was, Helga decided, now only a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man’s pattern” (4). To Helga, the faculty member she sees as “important and resplendent in the regalia of an army officer” who “would pause in his prancing or strutting, to jerk a negligent or

¹⁶See DeFalco’s “Jungle Creatures and Dancing Apes: Modern Primitivism and Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*.” (In *Mosaic [Winnipeg]*. 38.2 (June 2005): 19. Print. See also Anisimova’s “Masks of Authenticity: Failed Quests for the People in *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen and *The Silver Dove* by Andrei Belyi” In *Comparatist* 32 (May 2008): 175.

offending student into the proper attitude or place” (12) represents the “big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man’s pattern” (4). This male faculty member is, to Helga, a virtual marionette performing to the codes of those white patrons who fund the school. One of the renowned preachers in the state, whom Helga calls “that holy white man of God” (2), intones to those students assembled, “. . . if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos products, there would be no race problem, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them” (3). Hence, this “prancing or strutting” faculty member is as much of an “automaton,” created from such conformist attitudes, as are the students under his command (12).

Helga found such attitudes and behavior stultifying because she had come to Naxos under what now, to her, seemed an illusion of uplift,¹⁷ which is central both to her observations at Naxos and to Larsen’s experiences at Tuskegee Institute and Fisk University, the historically black colleges in Alabama and Tennessee, respectively, where Larsen spent brief periods of her life prior to devoting her life to writing.¹⁸ In the introduction to the American Women Writers Series edition of *Quicksand*, Deborah McDowell notes of Larsen’s experience at Tuskegee Institute, “Unable to tolerate its stifling atmosphere, she left after only a year and returned to New York” (x). Similarly, in her biography of Larsen, Davis recounts, “Not surprisingly, Helga rejects Naxos, its students, and its teachers because she feels at odds with the restrictive environment. Seeing herself [as] different . . . in ideology and outlook, she wants the

¹⁷For a discussion of uplift and its centrality to the notion of African American educational advancement, see Kevin K. Gaines’s *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1996. Print.).

¹⁸According to her introduction in *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Nella Larsen attended Fisk University from 1909-1910. Then, after auditing classes at the University of Copenhagen, from 1910-1912, she began studying at the Lincoln School for Nurses in New York, where she matriculated in 1915 and went South to serve as Head Nurse at the John A. Andrew Hospital and Nurse Training School at Tuskegee Institute. Larsen “did not care for the South, however,” and eventually left both the South and the field of nursing “to begin work in the New York Public Library system” (Ed., Arnold Rampersad. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1997. 1065).

opportunity to live a fuller life than the racialized institution will allow” (260). I posit that Helga notices the awkward students because she sees herself in them – she does not fit the uplift mold, either.

Instead of uplifting her race, Helga finds these actions stifling, as they merely mold these young students into machines conditioned to do “what was expected of them” (3).

Consequently, the “negligent or offending” student is, perhaps, found moving out-of-turn, not conforming to the rigid dictates of the “military-officer-type” faculty member. To Helga, such accommodationist views spread plague-like through the campus “blotting out the pavements, bare earth, and grass” that varied its landscape. All that was left was a dull uniformity, accented by a “depressing silence, a sullenness almost” (12).

The fact that this sullenness is interrupted by the band’s sudden loud blaring of “The Star Spangled Banner” also is significant. Helga watches as the students she describes as “automatons” move in unison: “Left, right. Left, right. Forward! March” (12)! She internalizes the goosestep she sees and the calculated group movement as yet another example of the stringent dictates of this school. This college, to which Helga has come “with the keen joy and zest of doing good to [her] fellow men” (5) is, she finds, filled with “trivial hypocrisies . . . which [are], unintentionally perhaps, a part of the Naxos policy of uplift” (5). One such “trivial hypocrisy” is the students’ being trained to move on the command of the militaristic faculty member to the band’s sudden blaring of America’s national anthem, “The Star Spangled Banner.” Such action, to Helga Crane, signals another attempt to assimilate into a country that is so despised by her fellow members of the African American race. Helga sees the rigid goosestep, followed by the students’ uniform march, as the ultimate sign of how “[t]eachers as well as students were subjected to the paring process, for it tolerated no innovations, no

individualisms” (4). Worse yet, the fact that Helga interprets the band’s music as “blaring” symbolizes the essential white-washing she feels is smothering the life out of the collective African American voice and, therefore, out of the spirit of uplift.

In this scene, the juxtaposition Larsen creates between the students’ rigid goosestep and the blaring of the “Star Spangled Banner” functions as a metaphor for herself, Helga, and African Americans in general. The goosestep is a term typically associated with imperialism, particularly that of the German Army,¹⁹ during the World War, which preceded the publication of Larsen’s novel and may, therefore, have informed her perspective. Not coincidentally, the blaring of the “Star Spangled Banner,” which touts freedom, interrupts the air of imperialism on the campus grounds. For Helga, the noisy anthem represents the democracy that she experiences in Post-World War I America as she tries to establish a sense of community. This symbol of American democracy disrupts the imperialism associated with the European forces against whom our country had just been at war – and against whom African American soldiers had just fought. Accordingly, Helga is repulsed by the sight of these students’ goosestepping, or their emulating the very imperialism that sought to destroy them.²⁰

Helga interprets this scene as a type of performance, a public display of accommodationist principles and a break from those of racial uplift. On a larger scale, though, the performance she observes functions as a metaphor for the protagonist herself. Just as the students are victims of what Helga likens to a paring process, so too is Helga. Naxos, by way of its militaristic faculty

¹⁹W. H. Tatum IV and E. J. Hoffschmidt acknowledge the rigid training expected of German boys, from as early as fourteen or fifteen years of age, as enforced “by a special imperial order” (9).

²⁰The observations Larsen ascribes to Helga mirror those in a letter Albert Murray wrote to Ralph Ellison on 15 May 1958. In the letter, Albert Murray compares the city of Tuskegee’s seemingly lackluster involvement in the Civil Rights Movement to what he calls “a very weak cadence” (*Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray*. New York: Modern Library, 2000. 190.). Like Larsen, Murray and Ellison had attended Tuskegee Institute. Both Larsen and Ellison had left Tuskegee disillusioned and disappointed with what, to them, was a stifling environment in terms of racial uplift, for Larsen, and culture, for Ellison. Coincidentally, both authors refer to their disillusionment with their alma mater in terms of a military drill.

members, pares the students from impressionable individuals into automatons, uniform machines. Similarly, the highly racialized environment of which Helga is a product makes her aware that she does not belong here. In effect, this paring process strips her of the false sense of community she had and leaves her a lonely creature constantly searching in vain for some sense of belonging – either in the white world of her deceased Danish mother or in the black world of the African father who abandoned her. As a result of this stripping down, or reduction, Helga feels distanced from the white community as well as from the black community. Here in Naxos, as in her previous residence in Nashville, Helga is stripped of any close family ties and left vulnerable in the process.

Wearied from what seems to her a futile attempt at uplifting the Naxos students, Helga resolves to leave this “place of shame, lies, hypocrisy, cruelty, servility, and snobbishness” (14). She sets out to move to Chicago, her place of birth where, having no family there, she lives in the Young Women’s Christian Association (YMCA). Helga lives here until she finds work as an assistant to Mrs. Hayes-Rore, “a plump lemon-colored woman” (35) who, as the widow of a former politician, travels to various conferences addressing the issue of racial uplift. Their trip to New York proves pivotal in Helga’s desire to connect with both her African American and white ancestry.

In fact, the dance scenes Helga encounters in New York enable Helga to transcend the limitations she feels her blackness has placed on her. Early during her stay in New York, Helga befriends Anne Grey, Mrs. Hayes-Rore’s “husband’s sister’s son’s wife” (40), who dislikes white people, although she embraces their cultural presence (in music, movies, and literature). Conversely, Anne Grey publicly proclaims “the undiluted good of all things Negro” (48), while she “disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race” (48). After

attending a party in Anne's honor, Helga, Anne, and a group from the party decide to attend a jazz club in the area. Helga recalls from this night: "[African Americans] danced, ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms" (59). In this scene, the tomtoms function as a type of cultural memory in which Helga Crane is connected, albeit distantly, to a fictive African past. This past is best described as fictive for two reasons. First, Larsen explains the "thumping . . . tomtoms" as "unseen" in a literal sense. Helga cannot see the tomtoms, but the "streaming rhythm" conjures ideas of an imagined African past (59). Also, the tomtoms Helga imagines are "unseen," as in unknown, to her. Consequently, she is left only to imagine the rhythm these drums produce. Furthermore, the "violent twisting" of these black bodies "like whirling leaves" speaks to the wild abandon that Helga Crane notices in the dancing bodies around her (59).

The drumming that Larsen writes about establishes a direct link for Helga to her African heritage. In fact, they represent the third mode of drumming, the dance mode, which ethnomusicologist J. H. Kwabena Nketia²¹ identifies among the Akan community in Ghana, West Africa. The dance mode of drumming merges both music and dance as a repository of African culture (17). This phenomenon is exactly what Helga Crane experiences in the jazz club. Larsen's fellow Harlem Renaissance writer Langston Hughes writes of a similar trance-inducing effect from "the low beating of the tom-toms" in his poem "Danse Africaine."²² Such references emphasize America's focus on primitivism during this time, as well as African American artists' collective longing to connect with their seemingly elusive African heritage.

²¹See Nketia. *Drumming in Akan Communities* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, Ltd., 1963. 17. Print.).

²²Hughes's "Danse Africaine," published in 1922 and 1926, references a "night-veiled girl" who, like Helga Crane in the jazz club "whirls softly into a / circle of light" as "the low beating of the tom-toms / . . . stirs [her] blood" and compels her to "Dance!" (in *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*. New York: Vintage Books, 1974. 7)

This particular scene completely absorbs Helga, so much so that she:

[f]or a while, . . . was oblivious of the reek of flesh, smoke, and alcohol, oblivious of the oblivion of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. (59)

Indeed, the dancing Helga witnesses so captures her interest that she becomes completely unaware of everything else around her: “The essence of life seemed bodily motion” (59). This quote emphasizes the power of dance to transcend or transform, to communicate, to unify or preserve cultural identity, and to empower the individual.²³ Helga Crane experiences all of the above. She is entranced by what she sees, as evidenced by the fact that she “dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort” (59). At least for this moment, she ascends out of the realm of her present quandary and into a world of no boundaries, wherein she feels “oblivious of the color” of the scene (59). Larsen’s emphasis on color, in this instance, has a dual meaning. For example, in a literal sense, Helga is oblivious to the very scene of everything around her. Similarly, she is oblivious to “the noise,” and to “the reek of flesh, smoke, and alcohol.” In a figurative sense, though, the color to which Helga is oblivious is the blackness of the “gyrating pairs,” which Larsen describes as “violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm” (59). Larsen re-emphasizes this figurative meaning of color in her detailing the music of the “murky orchestra,” which “lifted and sustained” Helga.

²³In his book *Dancing: The Pleasure, Power, and Art of Movement*, Gerald Jonas notes, “Through dances of different types, Korean shamans and African fetish-priests and evangelical Christians and Indian outcastes and Javanese Muslims open channels of communication with the powers that be” (30). In many instances, spectators of these performances report being transformed into active collaborators, moving in concert with the performers. Communing with the spirit world empowers the dancers, and the retention of these practices preserves cultural identity. Consequently, such dances demonstrate the four basic powers of dance (New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with Thirteen/WNET, 1992).

Just as the dancing bodies Helga observes transcend the limits placed on her blackness and transform her into an altered state of (race) consciousness, they also communicate to Helga aspects of an imagined African heritage, of which she knows so little, but longs to know so much. Larsen writes, “When suddenly the music died, [Helga] dragged back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her” (59). The “bodily motion” Helga witnesses speaks, literally, to her soul, somehow recalling this African aspect of her heritage, which she has come to detest (59). As a result, these dancing bodies become a reservoir of Helga’s cultural identity, whether or not she realizes it or accepts it as such. She is at once unified with her African heritage, while entranced, and yet distanced from it, once the music stops. Even the fact that Helga Crane feels ashamed that “not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it” (59) attests to the way in which these dancing bodies add to Helga’s confusion.

Once the music ends, Helga returns to her current state of disdain for this motley race of people to whom she knows she belongs but dreads such association. Helga tells herself she is not a “jungle creature,” as these dancing bodies represent to her. Furthermore, Larsen writes, “[Helga] cloaked herself in a faint disgust as she watched the entertainers throw themselves about to the bursts of syncopated jangle, and when the time came again for the patrons to dance, she declined” (59). Helga’s conscious act of telling herself she is not a jungle creature signifies a deliberate meditation on the subject. She affirms that she is not a “jungle creature” so as to convince herself that she is unlike the bodies dancing before her. Helga is ashamed that, subconsciously, she enjoyed this scene; indeed, she is transformed by this scene. Once the music ends, however, Helga is jolted back to the reality of her honest feelings of disregard for these dancing creatures.

The language Larsen uses to describe the dancing in this scene is compelling. To show Helga's feeling of disconnection from her African heritage, Larsen depicts Helga Crane making a bold gesture of "cloaking herself in a faint disgust," while watching "the entertainers throw themselves about to the bursts of syncopated jangle" (59). Larsen's use of double entendre, here, is powerful. In a literal sense, Helga's "faint disgust" represents her pale, faint complexion as a light-skinned mulatto. On the other hand, this term implies Helga's slight perturbation at seeing "the entertainers throw themselves about to bursts of syncopated jangle" (59). Helga is caught somewhere between being incensed and being intrigued by the conflated music and dancing bodies in her midst. She teeters back and forth between these two emotions, feeling both drawn to the savage, "syncopated jangle" of her African heritage, yet repulsed by this stereotypical marker of her own despised people. Also poignant is Larsen's description of how the crowd, to Helga, seems "strangled by the savage strains of music" (59). This music that Helga hears represents music of her African ancestors, thought barbaric by their European colonizers. As well, the strangulation Helga infers points to Helga's own internal tension. Metaphorically, Helga represents the crowd of "sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pink white, pastry white" (59) people in her midst. Helga sees herself among the crowd, and the strong jungle rhythms strangle – overpower – her white-brown body, leaving her transfixed and immersed – albeit briefly – in the "syncopated jangle" of these, her African ancestors. Symbolically, the "savage strains of music" represent the elements of Helga's African heritage corrupting those of her European heritage. Such an interpretation explains why Helga – mesmerized by elements of her seemingly elusive African heritage – "marveled at the gradations within this oppressed race of hers" (59). The music and beautiful black dancing bodies connect Helga Crane with her African heritage.

Throughout the jazz club scene, Larsen's complex details represent the ambiguity with which Helga views her African American ethnicity. Larsen describes how Helga sees various aspects of her heritage enlivened in "black eyes in white faces, brown eyes in yellow faces, gray eyes in brown faces, blue eyes in tan faces" (59). Helga sees herself amidst what, to her, is "a fantastic motley of ugliness and beauty" in these faces from "Africa, Europe, perhaps with a pinch of Asia" (59). This sight, like the "bursts of syncopated jangle," (59) both amuses and annoys Helga. Helga is both repulsed by and attracted to this vast array of people with whom she shares a bond of heritage, but between whom exists a gulf of separation. Consequently, "she was blind to [the] charm" of these "semi-barbaric, sophisticated, [and] exotic" bodies (60). She felt a connection with, although she rejected, this association with these people of her despised race. As a result, "her interest in the moving mosaic waned" (60). Her demeanor changed, once again, to one "purposefully aloof and a little contemptuous" (60), of the bodies dancing effortlessly, as if one with the music.

Helga experiences similar emotions when watching Dr. Anderson dance with Audrey Denney, a woman for whom Helga feels an "envious admiration" because of her courage "to ignore racial barriers and give her attention to people" (62). Helga watched as "[Audrey's] long, slender body swayed with an eager pulsing motion. She danced with grace and abandon, gravely, yet with obvious pleasure, her legs, her hips, her back, all swaying gently, swung by that wild music from the heart of the jungle" (62). Here, Helga takes note of the "eager pulsing motion" with which Audrey's body swayed to the music (62). This description is not unlike the one previously referenced in which Helga meditates on how "[the black people] danced . . . violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms" (59). In both instances, Helga seems

to make a mental note of the pulsating rhythm of the “jungle” music and the sense of wild abandon with which these black bodies move to the music.²⁴ Both scenes contrast Helga to Audrey because, in the earlier scene, Helga experiences a “shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it” (59). On the other hand, as far as Helga can ascertain, Audrey Denney dances unabashedly to these African rhythms “with obvious pleasure” (62). In essence, Helga’s viewing of Audrey Denney’s dancing reminds her of a mythical African heritage from which she feels so distant, but to which she wished she had the type of connection Audrey Denney clearly has.

Significantly, Audrey Denney’s dancing exudes the individual expression and improvisation so popular during this time. Popular in America during the 1920s were social dances like the Charleston,²⁵ Breakaway,²⁶ and Lindy Hop,²⁷ all of which retained elements of African culture and, therefore, helped to transform the dance club and dance hall scene.²⁸ The connection Larsen establishes with actual practices both in West Africa and Harlem reinforces the concept of America’s fascination with primitivism during this time. For Helga, though, Audrey Denney’s dancing body now registers as a concrete marker of the cultural memory that

²⁴Larsen’s description, here, resembles the gahu dance, indigenous to Nigeria, in West Africa, which was popular during the 1920s. The Arts Council of Ghana describe the gahu as a gay and spontaneous dance in which the girl exhibits a “studied coyness” as she moves away from her partner’s advances. (Source: *Ghana Dance Ensemble*, 18. Print.)

²⁵Dance historian Barbara S. Glass denotes the Charleston as among the American dances that emerged within the black community of the rural South and “bears striking similarity to an Asante ancestor dance that was still being performed in Africa” into the 1930s. Charleston dancers perform with “bent torso, knees, and elbows,” grounded moves which are quintessentially African in origin. (*African American Dance: An Illustrated History*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2007. 184.).

²⁶Glass describes the Breakaway as “a dance that developed in Harlem in the early twenties, which included both Charleston steps and the classic breakaway move” in which partners would break away from one another and execute improvised solo movements (249).

²⁷“The Lindy Hop,” or “Lindy” is a dance whose name reflects “Charles ‘Lindy’ Lindbergh and his recent ‘hop’ across the Atlantic.” “The Lindy Hop” fuses “elements of both European and African dance heritage – couple dance, solo dance, improvisation, orientation to earth, and swinging rhythms” (Glass 249).

²⁸A 1943 *New York Times* article by John Martin describes the large amounts of improvisation, acrobatics, strength, and eroticism that characterize popular dances of the 1920s as he witnessed them in Harlem’s famous Savoy Ballroom.

connects her with this aspect of heritage and also serves as a reminder of Helga's inability to fully connect to it.

Seeing Audrey Denney dance seemingly so in unison with the music reinforces Helga's feelings of inadequacy, loneliness, and disconnection. In this particular scene, Audrey Denney's dancing – along with Anne Grey's description of Audrey as one who “gives parties for white and colored people together” (64) -- makes Helga conscious, even critical, of her own relationships. To Helga, Audrey Denney seems to be able to meld as easily with whites as with blacks, a characteristic of which Helga is admittedly envious.

Attempting to put this pain of not belonging behind her, Helga sets sail to Copenhagen to connect with her maternal aunt, Katrina – Fru Dahl – and her husband, Herr Dahl. This journey, like the previous two, is, at best, bittersweet. On one hand, Helga finds in Fru and Herr Dahl the only other family which she knows, notwithstanding Peter Nilssen, Helga's maternal uncle who responded to her earlier query with the terse rebuff that he must “terminate [his] outward relation with [Helga]” (54). Fru and Herr Dahl, like Helga's mother, are Danish. Helga's move to Copenhagen to live with her white Danish relatives signifies her breaking all ties to the black communities in America, where, despite living in the North and the South, she never felt like she belonged. At least, as Helga's Uncle Peter states in his letter to Helga, “[Aunt Katrina] always wanted [her]” (54).

Eventually, however, Helga finds herself standing out even more. Her pale, mulatto skin marks her as “different” (68), according to Fru Dahl: “. . . you're a foreigner, and different. You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. You must make an impression” (68). This sentiment is not unique to Helga's Aunt Katrina. Helga recalls the following episode when shopping for such “exotic things”:

The ear-rings . . . and the buckles came into immediate use and Helga felt like a veritable savage as they made their leisurely way across the pavement from the shop to the waiting motor. This feeling was intensified by the many pedestrians who stopped to stare at the queer dark creature, strange to their city. Her cheeks reddened, but both Herr and Fru Dahl seemed oblivious of the stares or the audible whispers in which Helga made out the one frequently recurring word, "sorte," which she recognized as the Danish word for "black." (69)

Helga finds that, despite her greatest hope that she would find a sense of belonging here, among family, she feels completely isolated. Worse, she feels exoticized and objectified because of her African American race.

Helga's encounter with Axel Olsen, a painter and acquaintance of the Dahls, reinforces her feeling objectified. She recalls of their first meeting, "The great man hadn't addressed a word to her. Here she was a curiosity, a stunt at which people came and gazed" (71). This treatment bothers Helga. Despite the fact that Helga cannot establish a sense of belonging in America, at least there, she begins to recognize, her feelings of outsidership were primarily brought on by internal urges, rather than the external cues from others reinforcing this feeling in Copenhagen. Besides, Helga even begins to realize that while in Denmark with her Danish relatives, "she had missed, a little, dancing, for, though excellent dancers, the Danes seemed not to care a great deal for that pastime, which so delightfully combines exercise and pleasure" (77). This scene marks a turning point for Helga Crane. While in Harlem at the jazz club, Helga was ashamed to admit her enjoyment of the "jungle music," in Denmark, she realizes she misses this aspect of her heritage. Ironically, these thoughts do not perplex Helga, as they once did while

she lived in America. Her longing to dance signals an internal change she is experiencing. For once, she yearns for the dancing in wild abandon that she had witnessed in America.

Another turning point in the story is when Helga attends a circus with Axel Olsen, a Danish artist who would paint a portrait of Helga. Just as Helga, Axel, and their friends prepare to leave what, to them, had been a rather dull performance, “out upon the stage pranced two black men, American Negroes undoubtedly, for as they danced and cavorted, they sang in the English of America an old ragtime song that Helga remembered hearing as a child, ‘Everybody Gives Me Good Advice’”²⁹ (82). Written in 1906 by Alfred Bryan, “‘Everybody Gives Me Good Advice’” is typically described as a “comic coon song” (“Scholarship”) that laments the angst of the poor and their feeble attempts to reconcile friendship and financial woes. Ironically, the theme of this song represents Helga. Rather than struggling to reconcile friendship and financial woes, Helga struggles to reconcile her relationships with her aunt, uncle, and the artist Axel Olsen – who are people of means – with the fact that, as a result of her outsider status, she is not. Implicit, in this description, is the fact that Helga’s mixed race status also affects her class status. At the end of the performance, Helga notices, “the audience applauded with delight. Only [she] was silent, motionless” (82). This scene, as well, proves pivotal in Helga’s quest. Previous to this particular experience, Helga had felt the urge – whether ashamedly or not – to join in with the wild abandon exuded by the creatures moved by the “jungle music.” This spectacle, however, leaves Helga feeling a type of emotion new to her at such an observation. Larsen describes:

Helga was not amused. Instead she was filled with a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage. She felt shamed, betrayed, as if these pale pink and

²⁹Music by Kendis and Paley.

white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget. And she was shocked at the avidity at which Olsen beside her drank it in. (Larsen 83)

The “fierce hatred” Helga feels for the “cavorting Negroes on the stage” elucidates Helga’s self-loathing. In a very real sense, the cavorting Negroes on stage again represent Helga. She thinks:

More songs, old, all of them old, but new and strange to that audience. And how the singers danced, pounding their thighs, slapping their hands together, twisting their legs, waving their abnormally long arms, throwing their bodies about with a loose ease! And how the enchanted spectators clapped and howled and shouted for more! (Larsen 82-83)

Helga is familiar with the “old” songs to which the Negroes onstage danced, but to the white onlookers, the songs are “new and strange” (82). Like these songs, Helga is “a curiosity, a stunt, at which people came and gazed” (71). At the very sight of these dancers, Helga becomes aware of herself in a new and different way. She had once thought of American Negroes, “They didn’t want to be like themselves. What they wanted, asked for, begged for, was to be like their white overlords. They were ashamed to be Negroes, but not ashamed to beg to be something else. Something inferior. Not quite genuine” (74-75). Ironically, these very characteristics Helga once ascribed to American Negroes are the same aspects she has embodied, especially in her quest to find a sense of belonging. Now, in Denmark, where Helga is “the queer, dark figure, strange to [the] city” (69), she begins to understand why the likes of Axel Olsen see her as “a contradiction” (87). Like the cavorting Negro bodies onstage, Helga, too, is exotic -- a spectacle.

This performance reveals to Helga that the primitive fetish she thought unique to America exists in Denmark, as well. The ragtime song the men sang, “Everybody Gives Me Good Advice” voices the choral refrain:

“Ev-‘ry bo-dy gives me good ad-vice,
 But then no-bo-dy of-fers me the price,
 Well a glad hand shake and a good kind word
 Would-n’t buy a din-ner for a humming bird,
 Con-so- / la-tion may be ver-y nice,
 But money cuts an aw-ful lot of / ice,
 When you’re feeling might-y blue,
 And you ain’t got a soul

Ev-‘ry - / bod-y gives you good ad-vice. Ev-‘ry – vice.” (Scholarship)

The lyrics of this song’s chorus convey Helga’s internal frustration at recognizing her status in Denmark as the objectified other. Helga’s family and newly found friends give her what they believe to be “good advice;” but Helga finds that the advice they give her reveals more of their fascination with her blackness than for her as a person. Helga learns she cannot escape the primitive fetish she thought unique to America.

This ragtime music the performers sing demonstrates the pervasive influence of this American art form throughout the world. In *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, James Weldon Johnson describes ragtime as:

“music that demanded physical response, patting of the feet, drumming of the fingers, or nodding of the head in time with the beat. The barbaric harmonies, the audacious resolutions, often consisting of an abrupt jump from one key to another, the intricate

rhythms in which the accents fell in the most unexpected places, but in which the beat was never lost, produced a most curious effect.” (816)

This curious effect of which Johnson speaks applies both to the response exemplified in the dancing bodies Helga witnesses onstage in Denmark, as well as to the physical response she experiences in the New York jazz club. One also might draw parallels between the journeys of both ragtime and Helga Crane. Just as Helga Crane’s picaresque adventure exists first between the Midwest and South, ragtime “was originated in the questionable resorts about Memphis and St. Louis” (Johnson 816). Like Helga, ragtime “made its way [back] to Chicago . . . before it reached New York” (816). Accordingly, Larsen creates this ragtime performance as a metaphor for Helga Crane’s identity. Helga, like the dancers and the music to which they perform, is the spectacle.

Alone, Helga Crane has time to reflect on these revelations. When Helga ponders, “. . . [W]hy had they decked her out as they had?” (83) she is perhaps recalling how “The ear-rings . . . and the buckles came into immediate use and Helga felt like a veritable savage . . .” (69). Here, Helga’s feeling like a savage results from the ear-rings and buckles she adorns, much like the savage dancers of her African heritage, in which accessories such as beads and ankle bells provide a central pulse for the music to which dancers perform. In this case, they accent the black performing body, just as these gaudy accessories call attention to the exotic Helga³⁰; in fact, they help to communicate her so-called “difference.” Helga begins to see herself, as well, as some exotic type of showpiece.

³⁰Nketia contends that just as each society in Africa has its own distinct style of music and dance, “Some sing and dance wearing ankle bells; others sing, drum and dance” (49). The ankle bells, therefore, are important to the dance itself, for they are an important element of dancers’ dress simply because they provide a central pulse for the music to which the dancer dances, and they emphasize the movement of the legs and feet.

The sight of the cavorting black men on stage at the circus marks an important transition in Helga's life. Larsen writes, "The incident left her profoundly disquieted. Her old unhappy questioning mood came again upon her, insidiously stealing away more of the contentment from her transformed existence" (83). For Helga, this scene thrusts her back into the unhappy longing for a connection to some definitive group. She had come to Denmark in search of a community that welcomed her as an equal and as a normal person; and, for a while, she thought she had found it here. The performance of the black men on stage, however, stirred in Helga the realization of a void yet to be filled in her life. Rather than divorce herself from such associations, as she once seemed apt to do, Helga, "returned again and again to the Circus, always alone, gazing intently and solemnly at the gesticulating black figures, an ironical and silently speculative spectator. For she knew that into her plan for her life had thrust itself a suspensive conflict in which were fused doubts, rebellion, expediency, and urgent longings" (83). Perhaps this former feeling of embarrassment is the reason Helga chose to return the circus alone; or, she may simply have done so out of a sudden need to distance herself from those who found her as exotic and amusing as they did the dancing black male circus act. Moreover, Larsen describes Helga's return visit to the circus as ironic because when placed in a similar position as a "speculative spectator" of the motley crew of people dancing at the jazz club in New York, she had felt embarrassed about her secret enjoyment at watching the "jungle creatures" as they moved with wild abandon to the "jungle music," which also kept her entranced. Larsen's creation of the circus scene, the black men's cavorting on-stage as spectacle, and even Helga Crane's realization of her position as object witnessing this spectacle illuminates a global fascination with primitivism.³¹

³¹Historian Janet M. Davis attributes the popularity of the circus in the early twentieth century to its focus on the ambiguities of and within an increasingly modern society. (See Davis. "Bearded Ladies, Dainty Amazons, Hindoo

Similar to the type of cultural memory causing Helga to feel connected to the jungle rhythms that played in the jazz club, these dancing men, too, stir in her a resonance of her African heritage. Although Larsen does not specifically name the type of dancing the men are performing on the circus stage, her description is that of “Juba,” a type of dance common on the southern plantation. Dance historian Lynne Fauley Emery elucidates Juba as a “dance of African origin” (96) considered sacred within the West Indies. Once Juba (originally called Djouba or Djiouba, by some accounts) made its way to the United States, it assumed a secular distinction, characterized by the so-called “patting” motion of the hands and feet. According to dance historian Barbara Glass, “Patting Juba meant clapping and patting to keep time and to provide accompaniment during the dance” (113). Likewise, Helga observes “. . . how the singers danced, pounding their thighs, slapping their hands together, twisting their legs, waving their abnormally long arms, throwing their bodies about with a loose ease” (82-83)! Here, Larsen nearly replicates the Juba-type dancing, born of slaves in the New World fusing their African polyrhythms and earth-oriented posture with the rapid footwork and direct eye contact of the Irish Jig.³² As a result, she posits this performance as a metaphor for Helga’s bi-racial heritage, which makes her, too, a spectacle.

Larsen creates a veritable minstrel show via the men’s circus performance. The two men Helga observes “pounding their thighs, slapping their hands together, twisting their legs, waving their abnormally long arms, throwing their bodies about with a loose ease” (82-83) echoes the elements of blackface minstrelsy, a type of performance, initially enacted by white men,

Fakirs, and Lady Savages: Circus Representations of Gender and Race in Victorian America.” October 5-8, 2005. http://www.circusinamerica.org/docs/janetdavislecture_rev.pdf. May 21, 2009.)

³²Barbara S. Glass notes how Oliver Cromwell deported thousands of Irish to the new English Caribbean islands, where they worked as indentured servants alongside African slaves before both groups made their way to the mainland of North America. The sharing of their unique dance practices was but one example of the cultural fusion they demonstrated in the New World.

impersonating Negroes.³³ Eric Lott establishes the following parallel between blackface minstrelsy and circus cultures:

[M]any minstrel performers began their careers in the circus, perhaps even developing American blackface out of clowning (whose present mask in any case is clearly indebted to blackface), and continually found under the big top a vital arena of minstrel performance. Clowning is an uncanny kind of activity, scariest when it is most cheerful, unsettling to an audience even as it unmask the pretentious ringmaster. (24-25)

Lott's observation bears an uncanny resemblance to the circus scene in *Quicksand*. Helga witnesses the men's "clowning" gestures on-stage; and, despite their seeming "cheerful" performance, Helga's reaction appears to be one of fear. Perhaps her fear is born out of a dual realization. On one hand, the black men performing onstage in Denmark reminds Helga that, despite her attempts to escape this despised black race, she is indeed a member of it. On the other hand, Helga recognizes that she, too, is a spectacle among her white family and acquaintances in Denmark.

Adding to Helga's ambivalent feelings is yet another performance, which strengthens her resolve to leave Denmark. She attends a concert that featured Dvorak's "New World Symphony."³⁴ During his time in America, Dvorak developed an interest in African American

³³Emery notes the first extant reference to a white man imitating a Negro dancing was on April 14, 1767, when a Mr. Tea, providing a dance interlude for a slight-of-hand artist named Mr. Bayly, "presented a *Negro Dance, In Character*" (179-180). Emery also documents Thomas "T.D." Rice, a white actor, as having introduced minstrel performances to America. According to Emery, Rice saw "a lame Negro groom singing and dancing" (181). Rice copied the groom's exact "posture, movements, and song;" (181), "borrowed the [tattered] clothes of a handyman named Cuff; and delivered a modified version of "Jump Jim Crow," a song and dance indigenous to the Southern slave plantation. The lyrics of this song – "Wheel about, turn about, / Do jus' so: / An ebry time I turn about, / I jump Jim Crow" – are documented in Brander Matthews's "The Rise and Fall of Negro Minstrelsy," in *Scribner's Magazine*. Vol. LVII. June, 1915. 755.

³⁴Antonin Dvorak was a Czech nationalist who visited America from 1892-1895, during which time he served as head of the National Conservatory in New York. This symphony, titled "From the New World" comprises the first movement of his Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, Op. 95. (See Dvorak, Antonin, insert to Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, Op. 95. ("From the New World"). Performed by Fritz Reiner and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

folk music, particularly “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” Dvorak made the following comment regarding black folk cultural music: “In the Negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music.” This Negro folk music deeply affects Helga Crane. She ponders:

Those wailing undertones of “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” were too poignantly familiar.

They struck into her longing heart and cut away her weakening defenses. She knew at least what it was that had lurked formless and undesignated these many weeks in the back of her troubled mind. Incompleteness. (Larsen 92)

Although dance is not the focal point of this performance, as it is with other scenes that have so affected Helga, the choral concert, as well, functions as a narrative of her cultural memory.

Here, Helga recognizes the black American spiritual, “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” and the song moves her deeply. Perhaps the wonderfully rendered spiritual reminds Helga of the beauty rent from pain of a despised people, her people. Perhaps the familiar words of the song -- “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot. Coming for to carry me home” speak to Helga’s heart, as the song once had done to slaves who encoded within these lyrics news of the impending underground railroad, and therefore their way to freedom.³⁵ Similarly, although Helga is “familiar” with this song, this time, enslaved within her own misery, she hears the words for the first time, and they forebode

Produced by Richard Mohr. Recording Engineer: Lewis Layton. 1986. RCA/Ariola International, New York, NY.).

³⁵In this sense, Larsen expands upon a tradition in African American literature in which writers pay homage to spirituals, specifically “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” as one of the markers of their early acquisition of language and literacy. See Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) in which he attributes his personal enlightenment to “the dehumanizing character of slavery” (*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*. Houston A. Baker, ed. New York: Penguin Books, 1982. 57). In Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, he refers to “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” suggesting that for slaves, in their “veiled and half articulate” manner, the song functioned as a source of salvation for a people unaccustomed not only to the English language, but to life in this new world, in general. Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* encounters this spiritual, which, he says, produces “a most curious effect,” (847) of call-and-response, thus reminding him of the beauty of the African American community.

her impending freedom, the sources which are both her recognition of this undeniable part of her heritage and her decision, as last, to return to America to be with other African Americans.

This scene, as well, proves pivotal in Helga's identity. Larsen writes:

For the first time Helga Crane felt sympathy rather than contempt and hatred for that father, who so often and so angrily she had blamed for his desertion of her mother. She understood, now, his rejection, his repudiation, of the formal calm her mother had represented. She understood his yearning, his intolerable need for the inexhaustible humor and the incessant hope of his own kind, his need for those things, not material, indigenous to all Negro environments. She understood and could sympathize with his facile surrender to the irresistible ties of race, now that they dragged at her own heart. (92)

Significantly, the spiritual "cut into [Helga's] weakening defenses," helping her -- indeed, forcing her -- to feel a connection with those of the black American community who once uttered these words. Ironically, such spirituals, as part of the African American vernacular tradition, helped to build a sense of community for a people transported and scattered so far from their native home. Similarly, the words of the song transform Helga as they appeal to the longing, born out of her cultural memory, to belong to some community. As a result of these melodious words, Helga no longer feels "contempt and hatred for her father" (92). Rather, she "understood, now, his rejection, his repudiation, of the formal calm her mother had represented." Helga begins to comprehend her position as not unlike that of her father. In search of a familiar community, she has traveled from Naxos to Chicago, from Chicago to Harlem, and from Harlem to Denmark. Despite the kinship ties she re-establishes in Denmark, Helga comes to realize that she is yet incomplete. Helga's African father represents the unsettled jungle creature who

repudiates the “calm” associated with Helga’s benign white mother. Likewise, the roving Helga comes to reject the calm promised by her white Danish relatives. Instead, she finally acknowledges the void left by her separation from “those things, not material, indigenous to all Negro environments” (92). Because of these two scenes, Helga realizes her undeniable connection to the African American community.

The fact that Helga recognizes this black spiritual rendered in a white composer’s symphony, entitled “New World,” is highly ironic. Perhaps the most obvious irony is that Helga recognizes the “wailing undertones” of this black spiritual embedded within a white composer’s symphony.³⁶ Notwithstanding students of Dvorak’s work contention that “anyone with an ear for tune and detection can readily identify part of [‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot’] in the . . . first movement of the symphony” (“Dvorak”), I maintain that Helga’s recognition of this tune, particularly underlying a composition largely considered a European symphony, is triggered by her cultural memory. From what Larsen reveals of Helga, we know that Helga spends most of her professional life distancing herself from aspects of her African American heritage, as elements of her black folk culture strangle like jungle vines and yolk her to her race. As Wall posits, however, the impact of this instrumental performance, compounded with that of the black vaudevillians’ twentieth-century minstrel show, “like Josephine Baker’s dancing, retains a semblance of the authority of its vernacular roots” (112).

What Helga witnesses, though, in this white composer’s rendition, is an in-authentic, watered-down version of a black spiritual. Such irony is fitting, considering Helga is Larsen’s fictional tragic mulatto character. Helga is in-authentically European or African; instead, she is a

³⁶In her essay entitled “Teaching the Sorrow Songs,” Barbara McCaskill describes African American spirituals as fusing African rhythms and melodies with European religious hymns to express experiences ranging from life to death, endurance to despair, and resilience to tribulations. (In *Teaching Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*. Eds., Paula Bernat Bennett, Karen L. Kilcup, and Philipp Schwwighauser. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2007. 26.)

conflation of both European and African American heritage, much like Dvorak's composition. Consequently, Dvorak's "New World Symphony," like the minstrel performance, function as an existential or epistemological metaphor for Helga Crane. Even the title, "New World Symphony," connotes irony. She hears this symphony in Denmark, where she had hoped to find a new sense of belonging. Instead, she finds that her family and acquaintances accept her because of their fascination with her "contradiction" (87), her "queer, dark figure" (69). Coincidentally, Anton Seidl, who conducted the New York Philharmonic in the premiere of the symphony, on December 15, 1893, used to say, "It is not a good name, 'New World' Symphony! It is homesickness, home longing" ("Dvorak"). Ironically, this very sense of longing stirs in Helga her decision to return to Harlem, to be with other blacks and the community of which she now realizes she is a part.

Again in Harlem, Helga, almost instantaneously, grows despondent over a thwarted attempt to reconnect with her former fiancé, James Vayle, and her seduction by her former principal, Dr. Anderson, who married Anne Grey. Wanting a reprieve from her misery, she walks, seemingly aimlessly until, by happenstance, she wanders into a church. This scene proves pivotal in Helga's development. During the worship service, Helga, again, is overcome by the singing of spirituals. Also she notices, in response to this music, "Men and women were swaying and clapping their hands, shouting and stamping their feet to the frankly irreverent melody of the song" (112).

The fact that Helga interprets the music as "frankly irreverent" appears ironic, at first. She is in a church during worship service, a place and time for reverence. Helga's internalizing the music as "frankly irreverent" signals her surprise that the music sounded anything but respectable in God's sight. One might note, however, that this type of worship was common in

many West African communities.³⁷ Stuckey writes, “Religion encompassed more for [Africans] than for whites, rendering irrelevant the distinction between the sacred and the secular – a false dichotomy to a people for whom emotional fervor and dance were integral to religious expression” (86). Accordingly, this type of charismatic worship marks a retention of African cultural values in America. Zora Neale Hurston, Larsen’s fellow Harlem Renaissance writer, expounds upon this type of sanctified worship Helga observes: “It is putting back into Negro religion those elements which were brought over from Africa and grafted onto Christianity as soon as the Negro came in contact with it, but which are being rooted out as the American Negro approaches white concepts” (903-904).

Helga, perhaps as the liminal mulatta character, is initially disillusioned by what she sees. Sensing her discomfort, “On the face of the dancing woman before her a disapproving frown gathered. She shrieked: ‘A scarlet ‘oman. Come to Jesus, you pore los’ Jezebel!’” (112). Helga does not realize the fervent singing and dancing around her is an extension of her African heritage,³⁸ and the woman dancing before her mistakes Helga’s confusion for vice.

Still, Helga remains in the worship service. Larsen describes her as:

interested in the writhings and weepings of the feminine portion, which seemed to predominate. Little by little the performance took on an almost Bacchic vehemence.

Behind her, before her, beside her, frenzied women gesticulated, screamed, wept, and tottered to the praying of the preacher, which had gradually become a cadenced chant.

(Larsen 113)

³⁷See P. Sterling Stuckey’s *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*.

³⁸In her essay “The Sanctified Church,” Zora Neale Hurston writes, “All Negro-made church music is dance possible” (901). (Hurston. “The Sanctified Church.” In *Negro: An Anthology*. Rpt. in *Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*. New York: The Library of America, 1995.)

For the previously seemingly disenfranchised Helga, the “performance” she witnesses about her begins to instill in her a feeling of empowerment. She is amazed at both the performance itself, and at the sight of the women’s involvement in the service.

In fact, Helga’s encounter in the church parallels her experience at the circus in Denmark. Helga is initially distanced, but eventually lured, by what she sees in both instances. Recalling Helga’s entry into the storefront church, Anisimova writes, “At first, she watches the service from a certain distance, as if it were a theater performance” (“Masks”). In this scene, Helga is as much a spectator of the “swaying and clapping” (112) of hands and the “shouting and stamping” (112) of feet to the church music as she is of the dancing black men “slapping their hands together” and “waving their . . . arms” (82-83) in the vaudevillian circus. Just as Helga repeatedly returns to the circus alone to view this spectacle, she feels “too well entertained to leave” the church service (“Masks”). While Anisimova relegates her analysis of the Helga’s being “transformed from a spectator to a participant,” to this scene in the Harlem church, I maintain that she is as much spectator and participant at the circus as well. In the church, Helga is initially a visitor invited to “Come to Jesus” (Larsen 112); and as Meredith Goldsmith acknowledges, Helga’s “resistance [is] swept away,” and “she yields to the ‘brutal desire to shout and sling herself about’ (Larsen 113)” (“Shopping”). Just as Helga no longer can resist this communal fervor, she can no longer deny that, in Denmark, she is as much of a spectacle as the dancing black male bodies dancing onstage.

This type of performance that Helga observes in the Harlem church resonates within Helga’s cultural memory. In her essay, “Calling on the Spirit: The Performativity of Black Women’s Faith in the Baptist Church Spiritual Traditions and Its Radical Possibilities for Resistance,” Telia Anderson notes that “Black people sustain an impressive tradition of African

worship, from rites of possession to the identification of a personal, corporeal relationship with the divine” (116). More importantly, Anderson attests to the way women usurp a space of power within the church, even when subjugated to seemingly menial roles. She explains, “Women call on the spirit, witness, speak in tongues, lay on hands, heal, dance in praise, and sustain the communal spirit of others” (119). Larsen describes Helga’s becoming entranced in the spirited worship, saying, “And in that moment she was lost – or saved” (113-14). Consequently, Helga is empowered and even healed in the sense that she finally finds a community where she feels she belongs: one of black women helping to sustain each other and the community around them.

Larsen’s creation of this feminist scene is itself an act of agency. Her words become the conduit of this space of female empowerment. In so doing, Larsen expands upon Jarena Lee’s earlier commentary on the subversive act of empowerment for women in the black church. In her nineteenth-century autobiography, Lee relates her “catching the spirit.” She recalls, “During this the minister was silent, until my soul felt its duty had been performed” (Goode 223). Just as Jarena Lee usurps a space of power, demonstrating her ability to communicate with the Holy Spirit, Larsen depicts a scene exemplifying this accomplishment. Consequently, Larsen extends Lee’s legacy while reinventing her own space of agency.

Another continuum is Helga’s mesmeric experience during the worship service; it is not unlike the one she had in the Harlem club. Helga “remained motionless, watching, as if she lacked the strength to leave the place – foul, vile, and terrible, with its mixture of breaths, its contact of bodies, its concerted convulsions, all in a wild appeal for her soul” (113). This scene echoes how, at the jazz club, Helga felt “drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra” (59). In the church, as in the club, “The essence of life seemed bodily motion” (59). Rather than reject this feeling, as she

had in the jazz club, this time Helga embraces it. Recalling Johnson, Larsen writes that “a curious influence penetrated her” (113). Caught up in the frenzy around her, Helga experiences her own transformation. Finally, Helga “felt within her a supreme aspiration toward the regaining of simple happiness, a happiness unburdened by the complexities of the lives she had known” (114). At last, Helga was saved.

This feeling proves to be fleeting, however. Although she meets and marries the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, a man who – at least in name – promises a new, happy life for Helga, once they move to Alabama, a chilling reality replaces her dream. Helga is subjected to a life of domesticity and child rearing, which take their toll on her physically, spiritually, and emotionally. She complains to other women of her husband’s church that she is always tired. Beyond disappointment, she laments that even the God who had saved her soul from misery, has failed her. Now, as when she was in Naxos, she speaks of “[t]he white man’s God” (130). Now, Helga prefers to spend her time alone in bed. At least there, she can dream of the freedom she thought eluded her. Alone, in her misery, Helga births her fifth child.

Void from this final scene in the novel is any type of music or dance that might somehow function as a narrative of Helga Crane’s identity struggles. I posit that this absence speaks to the larger issue with which we are left: In this final scene, we see Helga no longer as part spectator/part participant in a dance performance; rather, she is, at last, a full participant in this, her final performance as wife and mother. We are left to ponder the metaphor of the title *Quicksand*.³⁹ Carby urges, “Consider the metaphor of quicksand; it is a condition where

³⁹Chester Hedgepeth asserts, “Larsen’s most apparent literary device is metaphor. The title *Quicksand*, for example, represents the theme of suffocation and is used strategically throughout the novel. Her use of language and dialogue is often stifled and unconvincing, yet the main objective of the novel – loss of identity for a woman of mixed race – is achieved” (See “Hedgepeth, Chester M, Jr., ed. *Twentieth Century African American Women Writers and Artists*. “Nella Larsen [1891-1964]: Writer.” Chicago; London: American Library Association, 1991. 189-190.)

individual struggle and isolated effort are doomed to failure. Helga's search led to the burial, not the discovery, of the self" (173). I posit that Helga's search leads not to the burial of the self, but to the discovery of competing aspects of the self: black vs. white; her desire for communal acceptance, vs. her dissatisfaction within each of the communities that do accept her -- Naxos, Chicago, New York, Copenhagen, and, finally, the unnamed southern Alabama town where she spends her final days; her desire for companionship, vs. her disillusionment as the wife of Rev. Mr. Pleasant Green; her desire to leave the stifling South, vs. the repression she yet encounters in the North; her desire to find comfort living according to the dictates of the lingering cult of true womanhood, vs. her ultimate misery as wife and mother; her expectation of salvation through her newfound relationship with God, vs. her final act of questioning whether or not such a God really exists. Prior to this last scene, dance has factored prominently as a metaphor of her internal struggle between these forces. I offer that Helga's final performance as suffering wife and mother indicates not a struggle, but the ultimate act of surrendering to her fate.

While Helga's story certainly does not end on a positive note, more compelling is the larger statement Larsen makes about Helga's search for identity. Specifically, Larsen casts dance as metaphor for Helga's mixed-race heritage. Most importantly, by examining Larsen's use of dance as metaphor for Helga Crane's mixed-race heritage, I hope to offer a new way of interpreting Helga Crane as the tragic mulatta. Even though happiness eludes her, the dance scenes she experiences read as both literal and figurative steps leading to her connect, at last, with her African heritage. In this instance, Helga is victorious.

CHAPTER 3

DANCE AS A “FEATHER-BED RESISTANCE” IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON’S *MULES AND MEN*

The African danced about everything Today He is vitally concerned with understanding this new European life which is gradually displacing his own. He feels sharply the conflict between the new religion and his own out of which his art forms had developed.

-Pearl Primus, “Out of Africa.” *The Dance Has Many Faces*.⁴⁰

Among the artists of the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston has emerged as the quintessential voice of the folk.⁴¹ In *Speak So You Can Speak Again: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (2004), her niece, Lucy Anne Hurston, says of her aunt:

Zora arrived in New York City right in step with the Harlem Renaissance, a movement focused on making, advancing, and supporting the arts, politics, and culture of black Americans. It was not disconnected from the phenomenon of mass out-migration from the South, which brought along in its wake a cluster of talent ready to produce and express the thoughts and visions of “Negroes” long stifled by slave plantation culture in the United States. (16)

The breadth of her work, from the poems, short stories, and plays first published during the 1920s,⁴² to the seven books⁴³ -- four novels, one autobiography, and two collections of folklore--

⁴⁰Primus, Pearl. “Out of Africa.” In *The Dance Has Many Faces*. Ed. Walter Sorrell. New York: World Publishing Co. 1951. 258.

⁴¹In her book *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies*, Regina Bendix defines the term “folk” as, originally, “a category distinct from ‘primitive,’ a term applied to more spatially distant (from a European standpoint) Others. This division blurred when Americans adopted the European discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and merged it with their fascination for ‘exotic’ cultures on their own soil.” (See Bendix. Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1997.).

⁴²For the most recent chronology of Hurston’s life and works, see Valerie Boyd’s *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Scribner, 2003.

she penned during the 1930s, speaks in the African American vernacular⁴⁴ of which Hurston was both an active and passive observer.⁴⁵ She was a native of Eatonville, Florida, the first completely African American city incorporated in America. John Hurston, her father, chose to leave Notasulga, Alabama, and relocate to the self-governed, all-Black town of Eatonville, where he was able to fulfill his dreams of leadership by serving three terms as Mayor and by writing local laws.⁴⁶ Hurston returned there as a graduate student in anthropology at Barnard College to study the folklore that informs her work and allows her to “replace hackneyed depictions of primitive dance with enactments of specific diasporic folk dances” (Kraut 31). The result of her fieldwork is *Mules and Men*.⁴⁷ Through her anthropological work in *Mules and Men*, Hurston demonstrates that dance functions as a “feather-bed resistance” to combat the erasure of African cultural traditions, to protest racism, and to show Southern black cultural generativity.

Hurston introduces the term “feather bed resistance” in the introduction to *Mules and Men*:

⁴³Hurston’s *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, originally titled *Big Nigger*, was published in 1934; *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published in 1937; *Moses, Man of the Mountain* was published in 1939; and *Seraph on the Suwanee* was published in 1948. Her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, was published in 1948. Hurston’s first collection of folklore, *Mules and Men* was published in 1935; the second, *Tell My Horse*, was published in 1938.

⁴⁴Anthea Kraut asserts that Hurston doesn’t use the word ‘vernacular,’ but instead uses ‘folk,’ like many of her Harlem Renaissance contemporaries, to refer to Southern African Americans and the West Indian peoples, who were her research participants (See Kraut. *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2008. 21).

⁴⁵For a discussion of Hurston as a participant-observer in her fieldwork, see Kraut. As well, Ve’Ve’ Clark establishes a parallel between Hurston and Katherine Dunham, describing the “research-to-performance” methodology that both women employed in their anthropological work (Clark. “Performing the Memory of Difference in Afro-Caribbean Dance: Katherine Dunham’s Choreography, 1938-87.” *History and Memory in African-American Culture*. Ed. Genevieve Fabre and Robert O’Meally. New York: Oxford UP, 1994. 188-204.).

⁴⁶Source: *Speak, So You Can Speak Again: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*, New York: Doubleday, 2004, 9; Reprinted in *Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings*. New York: Library of Congress, 1995. 569.

⁴⁷According to the program announcement for the musical revue Hurston produced, entitled *The Great Day*, Hurston spent just over three years in the South collecting material in an effort to represent African American folk culture. (See Kraut. *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2008. 45.).

And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see, we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, ‘Get out of here!’ We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn’t know what he is missing. . . . The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries. (10)

For the purposes of this chapter, I contend that Hurston posits black dance in the South as a type of feather-bed resistance. As a type of performance, it masks the type of agency southern blacks have enacted for their own survival in Jim Crow America. Hurston was not the first scholar to assert the type of masking intimated by her term “feather-bed resistance.” For example, in his 1895 poem “We Wear the Mask,” Paul Laurence Dunbar (1872-1906) describes African Americans’ seemingly docile acquiescence to a white-dominated America as a mask to hide the pain and anguish they have experienced as a result of American slavery. W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, originally published in 1903, introduced the term “double-consciousness,” (8) to represent African Americans’ sense of always having to negotiate their identity based on how white Americans view them, rather than on how they actually view themselves. After Hurston’s 1935 publication of *Mules and Men*, this trope of masking persisted in African American literature. In his 1941 book *Twelve Million Black Voices*, Richard Wright (1908-1960) elucidated how African Americans camouflaged their complexities as enigmas to white Americans, who simply saw African Americans as the “Other.”⁴⁸ Hurston’s focus on dance as a veiled resistance to white control, however, deserves far more scrutiny than scholars have previously afforded it. This chapter is my attempt to fill this void.

⁴⁸See, Braxton, Joanne M., ed. *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. (Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1993. 71; Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, (New York: Vintage Books/The Library of America, 1990. 8); and Richard Wright, *Twelve Million Black Voices* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth P, 1941. 57).

Notwithstanding some early criticism of *Mules and Men* for its lack of substantive analysis,⁴⁹ on the whole, this work of folklore has received positive reviews since its initial publication. Henry Lee Moon's book review applauds the intimacy Hurston creates with her readers through her reproduction of southern black dialect, and Cheryl Wall acknowledges *Mules and Men* as the first collection of African American folklore published by an African American.⁵⁰ In fact, much of the extant scholarship focuses on the performative elements in *Mules and Men*, including singing, joking, and dancing. One of the earliest reviews on *Mules and Men*, by H.I. Brock,⁵¹ exemplifies this statement. Moreover, scholars such as Sandra Dolby-Stahl⁵² and Lynda Marion Hill⁵³ view Hurston's writing as type of performance through which she brings to life the singing, joking, and dancing among blacks in her native Eatonville, Florida. These scholars applaud the attention Hurston brings to dance as a distinct element of the African American vernacular tradition.

With her book entitled *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston* (2008), Anthea Kraut is the only scholar who has focused specifically on Hurston's actual use of dance to demonstrate the African cultural retentions in the African American South.

⁴⁹Rosan Augusta Jordan explains that many folklorists disapproved of Hurston's methodology; they thought Hurston merely recorded what she observed, but offered no substantive analysis. (See Jordan. "Not into Cold Space: Zora Neale Hurston and J. Frank Dobie as Holistic Folklorists." *Southern Folklore*. 49.2 (1992): 109-131. Rpt. in *Short Story Criticism*. Ed. Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau. Vol. 80. Detroit: Gale, 2005. 109-131. *Literature Resource Center*. Gale. UNIV OF GEORGIA LIBRARIES. 31 July 2009 <<http://go.galegroup.com.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/ps/start.do?p=LitRC&u=uga>>.

⁵⁰See Book Review. (December 11, 1935. Reprinted in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad P, Inc., 1993. 10). See "Zora Neale Hurston. Changing Her Own Words." in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. (Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad P, 1993. Print.)

⁵¹See H. I. Brock's review, which appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, November 10, 1935. (Rpt. in *Zora Neale Hurston: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K. A. Appiah. New York: Amistad P, 1993. Print.)

⁵²In her essay entitled, "Literary Objective: Hurston's Use of Personal Narrative in *Mules and Men*," Dolby-Stahl states that Hurston illuminates dance as a type of performance narrative within her work. (Ed. Gloria L. Cronin. *Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1998. Print.)

⁵³Hill views Hurston's work as a stage on which delivers southern black expressive forms as reservoirs of African culture and heritage. (*Social Rituals and the Verbal Art of Zora Neale Hurston*. Washington, DC, 1996. Print.)

Kraut posits, “[Hurston’s] determination to represent the folk in the medium of performance, and to embrace black folk dance even if it carried primitivist connotations, placed her along the fault lines between vernacular dance and the New Negro movement” (7). Hurston rejected the dominant view of the rural South as primitive and undeveloped. Instead, she viewed black southern culture as fertile ground for creativity and survival.⁵⁴ “Yet,” as Kraut attests, “however ‘hot’ Hurston has become within and beyond academia to date, her explicit engagement with black diasporic folk dance and her participation in the field of American dance remain almost entirely unacknowledged and unexplained” (4). In this chapter, I enter into dialogue with Kraut to demonstrate Hurston’s use of dance as a motif to represent African Americans’ “feather-bed resistance” to the erasure of African cultural traditions, to racism, and to notions that African Americans lack cultural generativity.

Mules and Men is divided into two sections. The first section details the various types of folk expressions that Hurston discovered by interacting with people in her native Eatonville, Florida. Notably, many parallels emerge between *Mules and Men* and her musical revue *The Great Day* (1932) in the way Hurston uses dance to demonstrate African Americans’ feather-bed resistance in children’s games, in ring dances, and in animal mimicry dances.⁵⁵

Among Hurston’s earliest recollections of the influence of African dance within the small African American community, she recalls watching children “playing the same games that I had played in the same lane years before” (57). She writes, “With the camphor tree as a base, they played ‘Going ‘Round de Mountain’” (57), a game in which one child stood inside the ring while the others “danced rhythmically ‘round him and sang” (57). Hurston choreographs a similar

⁵⁴In “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Hurston highlights the variety of African American folk traditions that demonstrate their adaptability to dominant white American culture.

⁵⁵See copy of program for “From Sun to Sun,” the alternative production title of *The Great Day*, Figure 2.1, in Appendix.

scene in her production, *The Great Day*, which debuted on Sunday, January 10, 1932, at the John Golden Theatre in New York (Kraut 1). Kraut describes *The Great Day* as a musical revue in which Hurston traces “a single day in the life of a railroad work camp in Florida, from the waking of the camp at dawn to a climactic Bahamian Fire Dance cycle at midnight” (1). Like *Mules and Men*, *The Great Day* contains original material from the three-year period Hurston spent conducting anthropological research in the American South and in the Bahamas. In between these various performances, Kraut notes, “the concert advanced from a scene in which men performed various work songs as they spiked and lined the rails to a series of movement-oriented children’s games back at the camp” (1). One of the performances, billed as “A Program of Original Negro Folklore,” depicts the children’s games Hurston recorded back at the railroad camp in Eatonville. Similar to the game Hurston depicts in “A Program of Original Negro Folklore,” the children’s game that Hurston records in *Mules and Men* elucidates cultural practice with obvious ties both to Africa⁵⁶ as well as to Eatonville’s folk culture.

This children’s game Hurston observed in Eatonville also resembles the Fire Dance, which Hurston describes in her 1930 essay “Dance Songs and Tales from the Bahamas.”⁵⁷ Similar to the “Going ‘Round de Mountain” game Hurston observes in Eatonville, the Fire Dance is comprised of three components -- the Jumping Dance, Ring Play, and Crow Dance⁵⁸ (Kraut 71) – all of which involve dancers taking turns “performing moves inside a circle of players” (72). Likewise, in “Going’ Round de Mountain,” Hurston observes “Little Hubert Alexander was in the ring,” while “The others danced rhythmically round him and sang”:

Going around de mountain two by two

⁵⁶See, as well, Darlene Powell Hopson and Derek S. Hopson’s description of a children’s game, entitled “Moto,” which is a similar type of fire dance that originated in Tanganyika, Tanzania. (Source: *Juba This and Juba That: 100 African American Games for Children*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996. 133. Print.)

⁵⁷See Kraut (72).

⁵⁸See images of Hurston demonstrating the Crow Dance: Appendix, Figure 2.2.

Going around de mountain two by two

Tell me who love sugar and candy

Now show me your motion, two by two

Show me your motion two by two

Tell me who love sugar and candy (57)

This type of African American children's game demonstrates a connection to distinct African dance practices.

The children playing in the circle in Eatonville, as well as the children and parents playing in like formation in the Moto -- a similar Tanganyika-originated game in Tanzania -- posit dance as mode of cultural generativity. Both games exhibit a sense of competition, which the dance historian Barbara S. Glass asserts is "a widespread custom in West and Central Africa" (21). Although the "Moto" dance originates in Tanganyika, Tanzania, in East Africa, its distinct elements of competition, the importance of community, and circular formation attest to a shared sense of cultural practices across the continent of Africa and the preservation of such in the southern rural African American community of Eatonville, Florida.

One of the other games Hurston observes in Eatonville is the "Chirck, mah Chick, mah Craney crow," which is a game she describes as "that most raucous, popular and most African of games" (58).⁵⁹ Like the Jumping Dance and Ring Play, which she studied among her Afro-Caribbean subjects, the "Chirck, mah Chick," "served as an embodiment of 'interethnic assimilation,'" a term Kraut borrows from Katrina Hazzard-Donald, who focuses on the counterclockwise movement within these games, also common among various African cultures

⁵⁹Hurston also records children performing "Little Sally Walker" and "Draw a Bucket of Water," both of which comprise a circular or ring formation, which P. Sterling Stuckey notes as a lingering characteristic of slave culture. (See Stuckey. *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*. Oxford UP, 1988. Print.)

(Kraut 140).⁶⁰ Not only does this particular game contain the circle aesthetic, it also consists of aspects of pantomime, specifically animal – chicken and crow – mimicry and the aspect of competition, all of which are unique to African-derived dance.⁶¹ As in her production, *The Great Day*, the children’s games Hurston records in *Mules and Men* “showed how corporeal and rhythmic facility were socialized in this folk community from an early age” (Kraut 131) and how, as Jacqueline Malone assesses, play “serve[d] as training for performance” (27). Hurston illuminates this idea both in the way she describes the circular formations unique to each game, as well in the way she reflects on the historical preservation of these games within her Eatonville community. She demonstrates how these children’s games preserve African culture and illuminate cultural generativity in southern black communities.

Pulling herself away from the fascinating children’s games, Hurston, or Zora, as she presents herself in *Mules and Men*, bids a brief farewell to Eatonville and travels to the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company in Polk County, Florida, where she continues her folklore expedition. Here, she dons the mask of a “fugitive from justice, ‘bootlegging,’” and the townspeople readily accept her (63). Arriving at the Cypress Mill Camp on a Friday, Zora is just in time to witness the frolickings associated with Saturday pay-days. In this scene, comprising Chapter IV of the book’s first section, Hurston, “reveals how humor and entertainment gave workers an opportunity to release the stress and pain of their work” (Patterson 146). In her book *Zora Neale Hurston and a History of Southern Life*, Tiffany Patterson writes, “On Saturday nights, particularly on pay nights, which came every other

⁶⁰Hazzard-McDonald describes how the counterclockwise circle formation united disparate African ethnic groups transported to the Americas as slaves. (See Hazzard-McDonald. “The Circle and the Line: Speculations on the Development of African American Vernacular Dancing.” *Western Journal of Black Studies*. Volume 20, Number 1. Spring 1996. 29. Print. See also Stuckey. *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and The Foundations of Black America*. New York : Oxford UP, 1987. 12).

⁶¹See Barbara S. Glass. *African American Dance: An Illustrated History*. Jefferson, North Carolina; London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2007. 21. Print.

Saturday, there was at least one dance at the Pine Mill Camp and a couple of others at the Cypress Mill Camp” (146). These dances become the focus of this chapter of *Mules and Men*.

Hurston reports, “At least one dance at the section of the quarters known as the Pine Mill and two or three in the big Cypress Side” (63). Similar to the children’s games in which they danced in circle formation, Hurston describes “the only dance [marking these celebrations] is the ole square dance” (64). Hurston says of these dances, “I had heard my mother speak of it and praise square dancing to the skies” (62). This particular type of dancing, then, had long been popular among this group. It was based on someone “calling figures,” to dictate various formations the dancers would execute, and had been typical of the Saturday night dances that enslaved Africans would engage on the plantations. According to dance historian Lynn Fauley Emery, they most often resembled a circle, but were “strongly influenced by the English Square Dance and the French Quadrille” (98). What Hurston observed as Square Dancing, then, blurs the boundaries of African- and European-style folk dances.⁶² Emery supports this notion that the type of social dancing that the slaves did on plantations, “were the white-influenced dances such as Set Dances,” (108) also called “Figure Dances.”

These types of dances demonstrate how blacks in the plantation South were able to combat the erasure of their African culture.⁶³ They incorporate the circle formation, a characteristic unique to African dances among the “Dogon dancers in the Dama as well as the slow procession of Egungun dancers in Yorubaland” (Glass 18-19), as well as the European-style geometric patterning, which “could be and were represented as lines, circles, and arrows on a

⁶²For a distinction between African and European dance characteristics, see Barbara S. Glass’s *African American Dance: An Illustrated History*. Jefferson, North Carolina; London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2007. 13-25.

⁶³For a discussion on the fusion of African and European cultures in the plantation South, see Glass: *African American Dance: An Illustrated History* (Jefferson, North Carolina; London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2007. Print).

page, and this idealized configuration of moving bodies again reflected a mathematical, intellectualized concept of society” (24). As I have written in my essay on *Mules and Men*, in Tony Bolden’s essay collection entitled *The Funk Era and Beyond* (2008),⁶⁴ Hurston conjures these elements from her cultural memory not only to disrupt the would-be image of an all-black Eatonville as existing in a vacuum untouched by any outside influences. In this description, too, she shows the way black dance functions as a feather-bed resistance to the complete erasure of African cultural elements. Instead, the melding of African and European influences demonstrates a distinct type of cultural generativity. These dances, rather than blot out African cultural elements, recast them so that they resist erasure by American culture.

Additionally, one of the folktales Hurston relates exemplifies the way black dance functions as a feather-bed resistance to racism. Joe Wiley, one of the Eatonville townspeople, recalls:

So [John] got Massa’s biggest rockin’ chair and put it up in Massa’s bed and then he got up in the bed in the chair and begin to call figgers:

“Hands up!” “Four circle right.” “Half back.” “Two ladies change.”

. . . . De git Fiddles was raisin’ cain over in de corner and John was callin’ for de new set:

“Choose yo’ partners.” “Couples to yo places like horses to de races.” “Sashay all.” “Sixteen hands up.” “Swing Miss Sally ‘round” and ‘round and bring her back to me!” (113)

From this description, Hurston shows that the African Americans in her home community of Eatonville, Florida, the oldest African American town in the United States, had created a space

⁶⁴In this essay, I discuss the African retentions and European elements of dance as sites of African American cultural memory in *Mules and Men*. (See Dismukes. “Cultural Memory in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*” in *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture* Ed. Tony Bolden. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 193-209.).

of their own in which to share elements of their African heritage remapped on an American landscape. These forms were common on many southern plantations, “although black music and movement vocabulary changed them significantly” (90). More importantly, Hurston demonstrates the ways in which African Americans in the plantation South preserved their African dance practices under the veneer of European dance forms with which they frequently had come in contact. In considering this dance as part of a larger performance in which John successfully outwits his master, this specific scene emerges as an example of the “feather-bed resistance” to Southern white racism.

Hurston also elucidates the ring formation as a feather-bed resistance. The circular pattern she records reinforces a sense of community about which Ole Massa is otherwise ignorant. Sterling Stuckey discusses this concept accordingly: “[T]hrough the Shout at its highest point of resonance, the ancestors and the gods exerted supreme power over the dancer. At such moments, dance was at war with the values of the master class. But the slave master could hardly have sensed such depth of protest” (44). John and the other slaves outwit Ole Massa in a similar fashion. Ole Massa remains uninformed of the real meaning of the circular dancing because the slaves have successfully navigated between African and European worlds.

Additionally important is the fact that both the square dancing Hurston records in *Mules and Men* and the Ring Shout share similar forms of African-derived movement. Like the previously referenced African dance characteristics within the square dancing, the Ring Shout “included circular formation, [. . .] centrality of the community . . . , as well as call and response” (Glass 44). Hurston’s recording of this type of dancing demonstrates the African cultural retentions among the African Americans in Eatonville.⁶⁵ Here, too, black dance resists erasure

⁶⁵According to Glass, coastal regions, such as Florida, were ripe for the survival of the Ring Shout because of the large number of slaves deposited along the Atlantic Coast, from areas such as Senegambia and the Windward Coast,

within dominant white America. Simultaneously, it functions as a feather-bed resistance to white racist tactics.

Significantly, John uses this performance to outwit his master, just as Hurston's recording of this folktale from Joe Wiley exhibits a dance style embedded within the folktale as a resistance tactic. After all, the frolicking that John's Master thought he recognized provided a type of feather-bed resistance and way of outwitting "Ole Massa." Similarly, Hill asserts, "In a theatrical and psychological sense, a mask can be donned not simply to conceal one's motives but also to expose one's awareness that, however unfortunate, deception is all too often at the core of social interaction" (xxiii). Likewise, Kraut posits, "Steadily appearing to conform to the regulations placed upon her," more often than not by her white patrons and publishers, "[Hurston] all the while worked to advance her own vision of how black folk culture should be presented onstage" (118), hence her theater productions of *The Great Day* and *From Sun to Sun*. Kraut expounds, "As a number of literary scholars have noted, this subversive masking on Hurston's part calls to mind the figure of the trickster, so prominent in African American folklore" (118). Hurston shows how the African Americans engaging in this superficial frolicking accomplish the same feat. Moreover, as in Hurston's intimation of the circle formation born out of the African Ring Shout, here, she garners power as storyteller and purveyor of African American survival tactics rooted in seemingly disparate African and European influences.

Another type of dance Hurston explores in Eatonville emerges in the toe parties in one of "the jooks" within her native Eatonville. The "jook" represents a place wherein southern black cultural generativity takes place. As evidence of the importance of "the jook" to Hurston,

for the purposes of cultivating rice (See Glass. *African American Dance: An Illustrated History*. Jefferson, North Carolina; London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2007. Print.).

the second act of the revue she choreographed, *The Great Day*, features “the interior of a ‘jook,’ where the adult camp members passed the nighttime hours playing card and dice games, singing the blues, and performing social dances to piano and guitar music (“Characteristics”). Hurston biographer Valerie Boyd notes how a dance, such as the black bottom, “which required dancers to slap their backsides while hopping forward and backward, stamping their feet and gyrating their hips,” was born in jook joints in the Black Bottom of Nashville, Tennessee, where Hurston lived with her brother Robert, his wife Wilhemina, and their children, George, Wilhemina, and newborn Hezekiah Robert, Jr. Boyd says, “The area was so named because of its complexion and economic status,” and “Zora, who would write about this dance’s origins years later, saw the black bottom performed at the jooks (and may have danced it herself a time or two) – that is, if Bob allowed her to visit any of the neighborhood’s pleasure houses” (Boyd 66-67). According to the literary critic Cheryl Wall, “[T]he ethics of the jook, and of the blues, give women far more personal freedom and power than the women on the store porch enjoy. Free of the constraints of ladyhood, the bonds of traditional marriage, and the authority of the church, women improvise new identities for themselves” (“Traveling” 166).

The dances Hurston observed at the toe parties in Eatonville are one such example of how the jook functioned as an improvisational space for the formation of new identities. These parties involved young girls standing in a single line, side-by-side, behind a curtain. One of the girls explained, “Some places you take off yo shoes and some places you keep ‘em on, but most all de time you keep ‘em on. When all de toes in a line, sticking out from behind de sheet they let de men folks in and they looks over all de toes and buys de ones de want for a dime” (Hurston 31). This activity took place amidst others dancing around this spectacle. Hurston described her experience:

Well, my toe went on the line with the rest and it was sold five times during the party.

Every time a toe was sold there was a great flurry before the curtain. Each man eager to see what he had got, and whether the other men would envy him or ridicule him. Babe Brown got on his guitar and the dancing was hilarious. (31)

These dances mirror the fertility dances Geoffrey Gorer notes among the Ouangaladougou on the southeast Ivory Coast. The dances involved a similar sense of male-female interaction, as four young girls “naked except for a necklace of red seeds and an apron,” dance their way to the center of a ring and enact the following movement:

They danced almost squatting on the ground, holding their tiny aprons in one hand, and scattering imaginary seeds with the other; they progressed with a sort of zigzag, a few steps to the right, then as many to the left. They arrived in front of the old men together and knelt on the ground; and each old man (priest) blessed them in turn, laying hands on their head. Four of them then picked up the little girls and carried them off on their shoulders out of the ring. (306)

This type of dance resonates in the toe parties because of the male-female interaction and the central focus on the young women – especially when most of the public ritual dances feature men – being carried off by the men, away from the center of the circle. This particular dance on the Ivory Coast enacts a fertility ritual; the other in Eatonville celebrates a courtship ritual. Both reinforce cultural generativity, but in different ways from the earlier example. In the preceding example featuring the square dancing, blacks in the plantation South have created their own type of dance that melds African and European cultural influences. The toe parties and fertility rituals, however, establish clear codes of conduct for black women, based on the black male gaze.

The African-influenced dances continue when, during another instance in *Mules and Men*, Hurston describes “de pigeon wing,” another type of dance that was common in this African American community. She notes, “Jack was justa dancin’ fallin’ off de log and cuttin’ de pigeon wing” (90). This dance is firmly rooted in southern American plantation culture; it involved “flippin yo arms an legs roun’ an’ holding ya neck stiff like a bird do” (90). It resonates the sense of pantomime Glass indicates comprises African-derived dances, such as those that “imitate animal behavior like the flight of the egret” (21). More specifically this type of dance recalls elements of West African hunting or monkey dances, such as this one reported near Odienne in the southern Ivory Coast:

They had sad-looking monkey masks of polished ebony with silver, and were covered in costumes of dark raffia and monkey’s fur leaving their hands and feet bare. They huddled on the ground, searched one another for fleas, scuffled – they were monkeys than monkeys ever were. (308)

Hurston similarly recalls crow mimicry dances that Melville Herskovits, another of her anthropology professors, observed in West Africa: “The crow, in some ways, seems to be sacred in Africa; but what they’re talking about is what we know as, in the United States is a buzzard; and the buzzard comes to get something to eat, and they are talking about it; and they’re dancing; and one person gets in the middle and imitates the buzzard; and they say – and the rest of ‘em form in the background” (“Crow Dance”). Recalling these animal mimicry dances as part of both southern plantation and African culture mines cultural memory, because the dances incorporate distinct elements of African cultural heritage: notably, bringing the sacred into the secular realm. Hurston says of African American dance forms, “The dances are full of imitations of various animals. The buzzard lope, walking the dog, the pig’s hind legs, holding the mule,

elephant squat, pigeon's wing, falling off the log, seaboard (imitation of an engine starting), and the like" ("Characteristics 839). In *Mules and Men*, Hurston offers her native Eatonville community as a reservoir of these African cultural practices.

The dance scenes in the first section of *Mules and Men* reinforce many of the same concepts Hurston introduced three years earlier when she produced *The Great Day*. In fact, Hurston's staging of *The Great Day* attests to her commitment to highlighting black cultural generativity. Although the term "choreography" did not emerge until 1930, the fact that Hurston actually trained the dancers to perform the Bahamian Fire Dance, based on the film footage she produced while studying in the South and in the Bahamas, establishes her knowledge of these cultural elements, her talent for recreating these scenes, and her desire to present these dances on the American concert stage.⁶⁶ Hurston sold her car to pay the theater rental deposit and her radio to pay for the dancers' carfare ("Chronology"), and she borrowed more than five hundred dollars from her primary patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason (1854-1946). Between 1935 and 1936, according to Kraut, modern dance icons -- including Doris Humphrey, Ruth St. Denis, and Helen Tamiris -- viewed, reproduced, and received full credit for what actually was Hurston's original production. These reproductions occurred despite the fact that Mason had communicated to Alain Locke (1886-1954), the Harlem Renaissance intellectual who frequently acted as a liaison between Hurston and Mason, to ensure none of Hurston's material was reproduced. By the end of 1932, Mason made a permanent decision to stop supporting Hurston.

In the second section of *Mules and Men*, Hurston records her experiences in practicing hoodoo. For much of the material comprising this section, Hurston thanked Langston Hughes (1902-1967), who provided her some very helpful New Orleans contacts toward this end. Hurston reports collecting "lots of thrilling things," including "a marvelous dance ritual from the

⁶⁶See Hurston's staging of the Bahamian Fire Dance in *The Great Day*: Figure 2.3, Appendix.

ceremony of death,” which inform this section of *Mules and Men* (Boyd 179) and serve her larger goal of illustrating the “African background for American Voodoo” (Hill 97). The death dance was a ritual that Hurston learned during her apprenticeship with Kitty Brown, “whose specialty was bringing lovers together and spurring marriages” (Boyd 180). Whereas the first section of *Mules and Men* depicts ring play, jumping dances, and animal mimicry that resemble Hurston’s production of *The Great Day*, the second section of *Mules and Men* depicts an actual voodoo ritual in which Hurston participated in 1928. Rather than examine multiple examples of African American folk culture, this representative scene shows how African American dance functions as a feather-bed resistance against notions that blacks lack cultural generativity, as well as resistance to the erasure of African religious practices and equally racist and sexist practices grounded in a Western world view.

First of note in Section Two is Hurston’s reference to hoodoo,⁶⁷ “or Voodoo, as pronounced by the whites” (183). She begins this section attempting to demystify the concept of hoodoo, which many observers link to the practice of conjuring evil spirits.⁶⁸ Hurston refutes, “Hoodoo is not drum beating and dancing” (185). These are, however, noticeable elements of it. She continues, “Hoodoo is private The white people come look on, and think they see all, when they only see a dance” (193). In her essay “Hoodoo in America,” Hurston expounds, “Hoodoo” is the term African Americans use in place of the word “veaudeau” (Voodoo), which

⁶⁷In her essay “Zora Neale Hurston’s Traveling Blues,” Cheryl Wall attributes, “The first scholar to undertake a formal investigation of hoodoo, Hurston originally published her research in an extended article, “Hoodoo in America,” in the *Journal of American Folklore*” (173). (Source: *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995. 139-199. Print.)

⁶⁸For distinctions between hoodoo and voodoo see Jessie Gaston Mulira, who writes, “[V]oodoo connotes the positive religious rites while hoodoo generally connotes the mystic and magical aspects that are usually evoked for negative purposes” (Mulira. “The Case of Voodoo in New Orleans.” *Africanisms in American Culture*. Ed., Joseph E. Holloway. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. 56. Print.). See also Joan Dyan, who explains that the various terms used for the Haitian religion vodoun, from which voodoo and hoodoo derive, are “most often used by outsiders to signal the backwardness, indolence, and greed that they feel needs correcting” (Dyan. “Vodoun, or the Voice of the Gods.” *Raritan: A Quarterly Review*. 10. 3. [Winter 1991] 32. Print.).

she calls “the European term for African magic practices and beliefs” (Hill 317). This concept would explain how the very practice of voodoo, and the dancing often associated with it, functions as a feather-bed resistance. People see dancing and know it has something to do with voodoo, and they deem it evil. They do not understand that voodoo, or hoodoo, is about far more than dancing. Dancing is merely a component of the conjure ritual associated with voodoo practice.

Based on this description, dance undergirds the concept of voodoo as a distinct type of cultural generativity born from the emergence of African cultural practices in America. For example, historian Jessie Gaston Mulira records that Afro-Caribbean culture – “including dance as well as voodoo” (40) -- stems from a set of West African religious practices overlaid with elements of European Catholicism. Given the fact that the hoodoo ceremony that Hurston reports occurred in New Orleans, where Afro-Caribbean immigrants relocated following the Haitian revolution of 1791-1803, one can easily conceive of the presence of such cultural fusion. In this case, the cultural fusion results in a Western concept of hoodoo that honors the secular misnomers surrounding an originally sacred practice.⁶⁹ Hoodoo, however, is a sacred practice; it is, according to Hurston, “the old, old mysticism of the world in African terms” (Baker 290). As a feature of hoodoo, dancing leads to spirit possession, which is the principal way through which Africans summon their ancestors for spiritual guidance. For example, Hurston describes the “whirling and dancing” (*Mules and Men* 204) as if in a hypnotic state, exhibited by her hoodoo instructor, Luke Turner, a hoodoo doctor who also claimed to be the nephew of the noted practitioner Marie Leveau. The dance aspect of hoodoo is particularly important, given the fact that Africans brought to America as slaves faced a potential loss of their native culture among unsympathetic slaveholders.

⁶⁹My interpretation is based on Hurston’s descriptions.

Hurston describes the voodoo ceremony in which she participated in 1928. She writes, “This was not a pleasure dance, but ceremonial . . . [It] is done for a specific purpose. It is always a case of death to the enemy that calls for a dance . . . [N]o layman ever participates, nor has ever been allowed to witness such a ceremony” (239-40). Boyd recounts Hurston’s experience:

Zora was allowed to dance as a delegate for Mother Kitty, whose neuritis impelled her to remain seated. Each of the six dancers had forty minutes alone on the floor, and the furious rhythm (created not by drums, which might have drawn police, but by heel-patting and hand-clapping) sustained Zora and the others for the full three-hour ceremony. Though all of the dancing served the same purpose – to beseech Death to cut down the womanizer – “there was no regular formula” to it, Hurston noted. “Some of the postures were obscene in the extreme. Some were grotesque, limping steps of old men and women. Some were mere agile leapings. But the faces! That is where the dedication lay.” A person who had been danced upon was supposed to drop dead within nine days of the ritual. (180)

Again, Hurston provides insight into the reason why those attempting to understand voodoo from a Western perspective view it as something mysterious and excessive, and therefore something that needs to be contained.

This misconception about African religion, from a Western perspective, lies at the root of the history of American slavery. As P. Sterling Stuckey notes, “The division between the sacred and the secular, so prominent a feature of modern Western culture, did not exist in black Africa in the years of the slave trade, before Christianity made real inroads on the continent” (24). Since, as Stuckey contends, “Slaveholders never understood that a form of spirituality almost

indistinguishable from art was central to the cultures from which blacks came,” (40), they could not comprehend that the often frenzied dancing was part of their sacred practices.⁷⁰

Consequently, European colonization included attempts to subdue African spirituality. From this vantage point, Hurston’s study demonstrates how the practice of hoodoo resists the erasure of African culture.

Hurston’s study of hoodoo also reveals that the dancing associated with it was fundamental to African slaves’ resisting the racist tactics that led slaveholders to attempt to eliminate any visible signs of African cultural expression. Likewise, Stuckey contends, “Attempts to wipe out African culture did not succeed largely because the master’s ignorance lasted throughout slavery” (41). Ignorance on the part of slaveholders led them to deny that Africans had a real religion. In such a hostile environment, due both to white racism and the absence of a homogenous African ethnicity,⁷¹ dance allowed slaves to “evoke their spiritual view of the world. . . . [They] could rise in dance and, in a flash, give symbolic expression to their religious vision” (41). In this instance, the hoodoo dancing appears savage in its wild abandon, when actually the dancers are summoning their ancestors for spiritual guidance and thereby creating a feather-bed resistance to racist attempts to quell this fundamental aspect of their culture.

In *Mules and Men* Hurston herself performs a psychological dance of resistance. Particularly, her studies in southern black folklore resist the erasure of African culture. For example, as an anthropologist studying the culture of the Eatonville community of which she was a part, Hurston occupies a unique space as observer-participant. When Professor Boas

⁷⁰In his book entitled *African Rhythm: A Northern Ewe Perspective*, Kofi A. Agawu suggests that making the distinction between sacred and secular is analogous to that between tradition and modernity (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge UP, 1995. Print.

⁷¹Stuckey notes that despite the presence of Igbo, Akan, Bakongo, and Ashantee cultural groups, they shared a dance that was common to them in Africa.

grants her permission to “go and collect Negro folk-lore” (*Mules and Men* 9), she realizes that, in order for the people of Eatonville to allow her to study them, they must not actually know that she is doing so. She considers:

If I had exalted myself to impress the town, somebody would have sent me word in a match-box that I had been up North there and had rubbed the hair off of my head against some college wall, and then come back there with a lot of form and fashion and outside show to the world. But they’d stand flat-footed and tell me that they didn’t have me, neither my sham-polish, to study ‘bout. And that would have been that. (9-10)

Knowing her material – that is the townspeople of Eatonville – she knows that she must enact a feather-bed resistance against notions that her newly acquired education sets her apart from the very culture of which she is a product. Instead, as in her visit to the Everglades Cypress Lumber Company in Polk County, she dons the mask of a “fugitive from justice, ‘bootlegging,’” and the townspeople readily accept her (63). In this instance, Hurston enacts a type of psychological dance in which, on one hand, she performs the role of an insider. Figuratively, she allows the probes of the townspeople, the subject of her study – to enter, by way of questions they put to her regarding her return home. This metaphorical probe gets lost among the pleasantries they exchange when “telling lies” in the form of the folktales. Unknowingly, they let her probe enter, in the form of her studying their culture. Likewise, by enacting this type of resistance to the image of educated Zora as an outsider, she puts the subjects of her study at ease around her. In fact, Hurston’s decision to describe herself simply as Zora in this book is a type of masking: She performs the role of a simple woman to camouflage her scholarly role as a savvy commentator presenting ethnographic reportage as a political statement about Southern African American culture as a feather-bed resistance to racism. Significantly, the probes of her white patrons, as

well as that of the African Americans of Eatonville, get smothered amid the laughter and pleasantries that the townspeople exchange with “Lucy Hurston’s daughter, Zora.” As a result, Hurston remains authentic to the people of Eatonville, and her work, therefore, remains an authentic representation of its culture.

Hurston also performs a literal dance in her staging of *The Great Day*. Although her work on *The Great Day* left Hurston the victim of what Brenda Dixon Gottschild refers to as “invisibilization,”⁷² her work in *Mules and Men* remains authentic in its presentation of African-American folk culture. Hurston’s work in *Mules and Men*, additionally, reflects the apex of her anthropological studies with Professor Franz Boas (1858-1942), whom she affectionately called “Papa Franz.” In essence, the permanence of Hurston’s recordings of African American folk culture, and her ability to replicate the very dialect, intonations, and gestures of southern African American folk culture outlasts the ephemeral nature of her staged production, which, ultimately became a less authentic representation of African American culture through white dancers and choreographers. Through this type of dance, Hurston demonstrates her, as well as Southern African Americans’, aptitude for cultural generativity.

Simultaneously, Hurston enacts a feather-bed resistance to racism in the publishing world. For instance, in the Preface to *Mules and Men*, Boas comments that by exuding “the charm of a lovable personality,” Hurston paints herself as an Uncle Remus figure pleased to entertain the white world with her tales” (Meisenhelder). In this way, she indulges white publishers’ arguably exploitative interests in African American life and culture, while also meeting first-wave Harlem intellectuals’ concerns for the conflation of art and political propaganda. Furthermore, Hurston meets the edict of Charlotte Osgood “Godmother” Mason, a

⁷²Dance historian Brenda Dixon Gottschild defines “invisibilization” as the systematic denial and miscrediting of the African influences on Euro-American performance practices. (See: Gottschild. *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).

wealthy white patron who essentially paid Hurston to “tell the tale, sing the songs, do the dances, and repeat the raucous sayings and doings of the Negro farthest down” (Hill 689); and, ultimately, who stopped funding Hurston’s endeavors, specifically Hurston’s production of *The Great Day*, when she could no longer control Hurston’s creativity and appeal to other white would-be patrons. While seeming to pander to an otherwise unsuspecting white world, Hurston actually see the value in African American culture as a much needed salve to “restore the balance” she feels was often lost in the system of values in African American culture (“Changing” 96). Effectively, Hurston presents her own agency as she depicts African Americans – by way of their games, tales, songs, and dances – exercising subversive measures to keep alive vital elements of their African heritage.

Hurston’s conscious efforts at preserving the performative aspects of African American folk culture marked her attempt to elevate this culture, which she believed “the Niggerati sloughed off . . . in their striving for upward mobility” during the period of the Harlem Renaissance (Patterson 10). As an African American woman writing about rural, southern, African American culture of her native Eatonville, Florida, Hurston was, to some degree, at odds with the basic tenets both of the Harlem Renaissance and of 1920s America. In fact, Hurston biographer Robert Hemenway writes that “many of the Harlem literati mistook her interest in performance as a lack of serious intellectual commitment” (35). However, although the Harlem Renaissance was a time in which “the pastoral sensibility was replaced by a modern obsession with the inner workings of the urban arena” (Dowling 172), Hurston elevates southern rural African American culture to an art form. In the process, she enacts her own feather-bed resistance to notions that blacks, particularly southern blacks, lack a sense of cultural

generativity. Consequently, Hurston's conscious efforts at illuminating dance as a feather-bed resistance demonstrate both her artistic and political acumen.

CHAPTER 4

FROM THE MOTHER LAND TO THIS OTHER LAND: SONIA SANCHEZ'S *A BLUES*
BOOK FOR BLUE BLACK MAGICAL WOMEN

Although occurring some thirty years apart, the Harlem Renaissance (1919-1940) and the Black Arts Movement (1968-1975) shared one common belief: "that authentic black art could only be produced when black artists liberated themselves from white influence" (Bernard 256). In both instances, black artists found their liberation by establishing a sense of community. Although the Harlem Renaissance connotes a series of events more regional in focus, David Levering Lewis reminds us that its alternate title, the New Negro Movement, more aptly reflects the cultural productivity that galvanized African Americans in areas such as Chicago, Hollywood, and Washington, D.C., in addition to New York. Economic and publishing opportunities in these cities offered comparatively more venues than the South for African Americans to earn higher wages and form communities to challenge racist politics. From these conditions, the "New Negroes" emerged as those who worked within the system to show their political acumen and creativity to be equal to those of mainstream Americans. The Black Arts Movement, however, celebrated a different type of "newness": "a decided rupture with the 'West / a grey hideous space'" (Jones 62) and a bold willingness to challenge white American authority.

Another major difference between the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement was their audiences. While African American artists, such as Langston Hughes, in his essay entitled "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926), called for freedom from the necessity of answering to the prescriptive tastes of either black or white American readers, some black artists of the Harlem Renaissance often self-consciously wrote for a white audience. They

sought to show how their writing stood on par with the literary productions of their fellow white artists, who, along with the predominantly white-owned publishing houses that gave the New Negroes voice, shared a common interest with post-World War One America in all things primitive. In contrast to many of their Harlem Renaissance predecessors, artists of the Black Arts Movement unilaterally “strived to succeed without white influence” (Jones 261). As Larry Neal asserts, “The Black Arts Movement represents the flowering of a cultural nationalism that has been suppressed since the 1920’s. . . .” (39), but reemerged as black artists combined elements of the African American vernacular in celebrating ordinary people and challenging the status quo.

Between 1970 and 1984, Sonia Sanchez published five volumes of poetry, including *We a BaddDDD People* (1970), *Liberation Poem* (1970), *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* (1974), *I’ve Been A Woman: New and Selected Poems* (1978), and *homegirls & handgrenades* (1984). In keeping with the spark ignited by the Black Arts Movement, *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* uses physical movement as a metaphor for African historical significance, American cultural significance, and the connections of African American women to their histories in both geographical spaces. Specifically, she uses physical movement as a literal reference to the historically circumscribed roles African American women have performed on the basis of both their gender and race. Physical movement in Sanchez’s book serves as a metaphor, first, for the forward progression of African Americans from an angry past rooted in the history of American slavery, towards a future that requires African Americans to embrace their history in order to survive.

Secondly, and more specifically, physical movement in *A Blues Book* functions as a metaphor for African American women’s call to embrace their shared African heritage. *A Blues*

Book is divided into five sections: “Part One: Introduction: Queens of the Universe” (11), “Part Two: Past” (21), “Part Three: Present” (41), “Part Four: Rebirth” (45), and “Part Five: Future” (51). Sanchez frames her poem in the voice of a griot who performs an oral history of African American women through stories, poems, songs, and dances. In particular, she assumes the personae of her “earth mother” (24), as well as a “young/black/girl” (26), “young womanhood” (30), and “womanhood” (38). All these voices are components of a larger manifesto that champions African American women, as “Queens of the Universe,” to find their place within the Black Power and Women’s Liberation Movements so they can support African American men in the cause of Black Nationalism.

In a 2004 interview with Joe Sims, Sanchez describes *A Blues Book* as “a long semi-autobiographical poem. . . . a lyrical poem” (“Speak Easy”). Throughout the interview, she defines the relationship between her poetry and her political activism, and she asserts the importance of cultural awareness, a recurring issue within *A Blues Book*. Similarly, Kalamu ya Salaam describes *A Blues Book* as “a long praise poem,” which “chronicles her growth into womanhood. *Blues Book* is a summoning of Sanchez’s poetic prowess to make a statement on the past, present, and future condition of black womanhood” (“Sonia Sanchez”). In comparing *Blues Book* to the hip-hop artist Sister Souljah’s first novel, *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999), F. E. DeLancey notes that the two most outstanding characteristics of *A Blues Book* are its form and its content: “Sanchez shaped *A Blues Book* as a young African American woman’s quest for self-knowledge. Because men are usually the subject of narrative quest, Sanchez’s decision to structure this narrative around the experiences of an African American woman was a daring challenge to the literary community” (“Sonia Sanchez’s *Blues Book*”). Another comparative essay by Joyce A. Joyce proclaims, “*Blues Book* takes the reader on a quest that is the ironic

reversal of the metaphorical journey we take in *The Waste Land*” (“Sonia Sanchez and T. S. Eliot”). This quest, Joyce asserts, traces Sanchez’s journey toward political consciousness. Joanne Gabbin classifies *A Blues Book* as a different type of journey, a “spiritual odyssey that reveals the poet’s growing awareness” of her psychological and spiritual development (“Southern”).

Houston A. Baker, Jr. situates what he considers Sanchez’s blues voice between that which emerges in her 1970 book of poetry, entitled *We a BaddDDD People*, and her work that follows in *homegirls & handgrenades*, published in 1984 (“Our Lady”). “The blues voice,” he contends, “is one of wisdom achieved through self-examination” (“Our Lady”) and is more apparent in *A Blues Book* than in either Sanchez’s earlier or later work. Baker places Sanchez’s work within the larger context of African American art history, and examines the use of vernacular and political didacticism in her early writing. For Baker, Sanchez’s use of the African American vernacular as well as political didacticism secures her voice within the history of African American arts and letters.

From Kalamu ya Salaam to Houston A. Baker, Jr., most critics of *A Blues Book* focus on the reflective nature of Sanchez’s language, both in terms of her personal growth as well as in terms of her relationship to the larger African American community. Albeit scant, none of this extant criticism examines Sanchez’s literal and figurative use of physical movement as a metaphor for the historical and cultural significance of African women in America. My examination of *A Blues Book* in this chapter seeks to do just that.

Sanchez’s *A Blues Book* begins by responding to the simultaneously inclusive and exclusive nature of the Black Power Movement, a grass-roots campaign which provided the backdrop for the Black Arts Movement by calling on African people to forge a united front in

championing the civil rights long denied them. According to *Afro-American Poetry and Drama: 1760-1975: A Guide to Information Sources*, approximately one thousand books of poetry by black American authors were published between 1946 and 1975, almost twice as many as appeared in all the preceding years of publication by blacks. Approximately 695 were published during the Black Arts Movement from 1968 to 1976, and of these, approximately 199 were books of poetry by black women (Clarke 19). Black artists of this era embraced conventions and themes representing a distinctly Black aesthetic, including the speech, rhythm, and images of black cultural expression (Christian 124). Employing the black vernacular, artists, in general, sought to make their work more accessible to their black audiences. Poets, in particular -- such as Amiri Baraka, Haki R. Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), Nikki Giovanni, and Sanchez⁷³ -- gravitated toward this style of writing since they “saw themselves as revolutionaries in the service of their community” (Christian 124), and these Black poets thus used their craft as “a principal instrument of political education about the new blackness” (Clarke 2). As Cheryl Clarke writes, from this “‘new blackness’ sprung a ‘new poetry,’ which spoke to black Americans’ righteous anger at white Americans, yes! And much of it spoke to new anxieties, interior energies, and soul quests enabled by the new consciousness, as some titles of individual poetry collections” (Christian 20). Often writing in free verse and adopting the language and rhythms characteristic of black speech, poets of the Black Arts Movement captured the attention of their intended

⁷³ Poet, essayist, and playwright Imamu Amiri Baraka represents this distinctly black aesthetic in his 1969 poem “Black Art,” in which he commands, “Let there be no love poems written / until love can exist freely and / cleanly. Let Black People understand / that they are the lovers and the sons / of warriors Are poems & poets & / all the loveliness here in the world.” (Baraka. [LeRoi Jones]. *Black Magic: Poetry 1961-1967*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969. Print). As well, Madhubuti (Lee) writes, “Black poetry is and will continue to be an important factor in culture building” (Lee. “Black Poetics for the Many to Come.” *Don’t Cry, Scream*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969. 16. Print.). Moreover, R. Roderick Palmer discusses the revolutionary work of Lee, Giovanni, and Sanchez. He writes that “in the poetry of these three revolutionists, we see corrosive satire and stark realism made all the more striking in that its outrage is presented in a uniquely abbreviated, yet comprehensive language. The writers speak as revolutionaries, and employ appropriate informal contemporary idioms” (Palmer. “The Poetry of Three Revolutionists: Don L. Lee, Sonia Sanchez, and Nikki Giovanni.” *Modern Black Poets: A Collection of Critical Essays*. ed. Donald B. Gibson. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1973. 135-146. Print.)

audience and sent an undiluted message not only of unity within the black community, but also of separation from the white one.

Although not technically excluded from the Black Power Movement, women generally provided a more supportive role to the men, who typically occupied positions of leadership. For example, Stokely Carmichael, former president of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); Malcolm X, former spokesperson for the Nation of Islam; and Huey Newton, co-founder of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, held leading roles in their respective organizations.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, women such as civil rights activist Angela Davis; Pauli Murray, founding member of the National Organization for Women (NOW); and Frances Beale, founding member of SNCC's Black Women's Liberation Committee, though stalwart in their politics, more often than not appeared in the media as subordinate to or not as influential as the men who dominated the Black Power Movement.⁷⁵ However, women poets were acknowledged as visible and significant contributors to the architecture of both the Black Power and Black Arts Movements (124). The groundbreaking black feminist critic Barbara Christian includes Sonia Sanchez as among the more influential black women poets whose works "called upon black

⁷⁴See Darlene Clark Hine, et al, in *African Americans: A Concise History* for a discussion of Carmichael, Malcolm X, and Newton and their leadership, which rejected Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s call for protest via non-violence and advocated, instead, for more radical means of gaining autonomy or liberation from white domination (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 2004. 433-436).

⁷⁵Davis's essay "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" acknowledges "androcentric biases in American history by calling attention to the scholarly neglect of the intellectual work and experiences of black women" (*Black Scholar*. 3 [December 1971]. 4-15. Rpt. in *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought* Beverly Guy-Sheftall. New York: The New Press, 1995. 199. Print). Additionally, in her essay entitled "The Liberation of Black Women," Murray writes, "... [D]espite the crucial role which Negro women have played in the [civil rights] struggle, in the great mass of magazine and newspaper print expended on the racial crisis, the aspirations of the black community have been articulated almost exclusively by black males." (Murray. "The Liberation of Black Women." In *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. Ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall. New York: The New Press, 1995. 186-197. Print.). Furthermore, Beale's essay, entitled "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" addresses the double burden of race and gender that black women face and articulates the necessity for the white women's liberation movement to be anti-imperialist and anti-racist. (Beale. "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." In *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. Ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall. New York: The New Press, 1995. 146-155. Print.)

women to heal themselves by asserting their pride in black beauty and by reassessing their relationship with black men, a relationship continually distorted by a racist society. . . .” (124).

As the Black Power and Black Arts Movements ushered in a rediscovery of African American history and pushed for social activism, black women poets like Sanchez began to reassess the conventional definition of womanhood (124). Here she exemplifies this strategy:

We Black / woocommerce have been called many
 things: foxes, matriarchs, whores,
 bougies,⁷⁶ sweet mommas, gals,
 sapphires,⁷⁷ sisters and recently Queens.
 i would say that Black / woocommerce have been
 a combination of all these words because
 if we examine our past / history, at
 one time or another we’ve had to be like
 those words be saying.
 but today, in spite
 of much vulgarity splattering us, there are
 many roles we can discard.

⁷⁶Stephen Early Jordan, II defines the word “bougie,” “pronounced (BOO-JEE),” as “an urban slang [term] for ‘Bourgeoisie,’” an expression historically denoting members of the middle socio-economic class, but co-opted in the African American community to denote a man or woman who “has a good job, dresses appropriately for work, [and] speaks standard English” (*Beyond Bougie: A Collection of Creative Nonfiction, Essays, and Poetry on Race, Class and Gender*. <http://books.google.com/books?id=PXLOGjm8o3wC&lpg=PA7&ots=AdKT-4IN96&dq=bougie%20black%20women&lr&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q=bougie%20black%20women&f=false>.)

⁷⁷Patricia Bell Scott defines “Sapphire” as “the caricature of the dominating, emasculating Black woman,” based on the racially incendiary radio-turned-television program *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, of 1928 and 1951, respectively. (Bell Scott, Patricia. “Debunking Sapphire: Toward a Non-Racist and Non-Sexist Social Science.” *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*. eds. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith. Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1982. 85-92. Print.) See also Regina Austin’s essay, “Sapphire Bound!” in which she attributes the pressures on minority female scholars to “cast their scholarship in race and gender-neutral terms” to the dominant White/male fear of the pervasive Sapphire stereotype among women of color, in general, and African American women, in particular. (Austin. “Sapphire Bound! *Wisconsin Law Review*. 1989. 539.)

there are many we
must discard for our own survival for our
own sanity for the contributions we must
make to our emerging Black nation. (11)

Here, in the first section of the poem, entitled “Part One: introduction (queens of the universe),” Sanchez recalls the many names and corresponding roles Black women have worn throughout their history in America. She emphasizes, however, that the emerging black nation depends on the contributions of black women, once they have been able to discard the more vulgar labels they have adorned.

The stylistic variation Sanchez uses, not only in the introduction, but throughout the book, reflects a major focus of black women poets during the concomitant Black Arts and Black Power movements. For example, aside from the “We,” as the very first word of the poem, the only words Sanchez chooses to capitalize are “Black” and “Queens,” thereby emphasizing the importance of these referential words for black women. Significantly, by choosing to capitalize “We,” “Black,” and “Queens,” Sanchez underscores her position within a community of black women who share a rich heritage as descendants of African queens, and Sanchez encourages black women to behave and elevate each other accordingly. These capitalized words, along with Sanchez's consistent use of the term “Black / woowomen,” echoes a distinct Black/feminist stance. On one hand, Sanchez's spelling of “woowomen” emphasizes the first syllable of the word, which stresses woman as being “not man,” but “of man.” This stylistic variation recalls Simone de Beauvoir's treatise *The Second Sex* (1953) on women as the gendered “Other.” On the other hand, Sanchez's use of the virgule between “Black” and “woowomen” echoes Sojourner Truth's 1851 “Women's Rights” speech, in which she ponders, “Dat man ober dar say dat womin

needs to be helped into carriages and lifted ober ditches, and to hab de best place everywhar. Nobody eber helps me into carriages, or ober mud puddles, or gibs me any best place! And a'n't I a woman?" (36). Here, Truth acknowledges that African American women -- for political, economic, and/or nationalistic reasons -- have historically had to prioritize or identify by either race or gender, but not both. Similarly, Sanchez's poetic license reinforces the premise that the words "Black" and "woman" are not mutually exclusive; in fact, the pressure of having to choose whether to define their subjectivity exclusively by race or by gender prevents black women's total inclusion in either the Black Power Movement or the concurrent Women's Liberation Movement.

Another example of Sanchez's poetic experimentation is the consistent, deliberate (mis)spelling of her command for black women to "mooooOOOVE." This progression from the lower case to the capital letter "o" in the word "mooooOOOVE" represents a building of momentum of the Black Power and Black Arts Movements, the gradual coming to voice of black women from slavery to the Civil Rights era, as well as an emphatic plea to black women not only to join these movements, but also to channel the spirits of their African foremothers through their own physical and psychological growth and movement. In Part One, alone, Sanchez employs the verb "move," in many forms, an impressive twenty-two times. She follows the aforementioned stanza with:

and what/how
we must mooooOOOVE to as the only QUEENS
OF THE UNIVERSE to sustain/keep our sanity
in this insane messed up/diet/conscious
pill taking/faggotty/masochistic/miss anne/

orientated/society has got to be dealt with

because that's us. You hear me? US. (11-12)

Sanchez's first reference to movement, here, seems ambiguous. Black women should "moOOOove" to maintain their sanity in a society that has imposed physical, sexual, gendered, and racial standards that historically have constrained them and limited their self-actualization.

For example, Sanchez's reference to "pill taking" here represents at least two types of oppression African American women historically have experienced. First, the "pill taking" references the angst and alienation the growing 1960s counter culture felt in a country torn apart by the draft and the Vietnam War (1960-1975)⁷⁸ as well as by "white racism" (Hine 441). During the mid-1960s, African Americans constituted ten percent of enlisted and drafted personnel in the United Armed Forces, and "this percentage increased during America's involvement in the Vietnam War" (Hine 44), even as they constituted 10.5 percent of the American population as a whole.⁷⁹ African American women lost an estimated 7,241 husbands, sons, uncles, brothers, and other male relatives and community members in the Vietnam War.⁸⁰ Many black men served in and survived the war while becoming collateral, post-traumatic casualties of drug and alcohol addictions, which they turned to in order to cope with the violence and losses of combat. For many Americans of all races and ethnicities, addiction to illicit drug use and even prescription drugs, as captured in such rock and roll musical chart-toppers as the Rolling Stone's "Mother's Little Helper" (1965) and the Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit" (1966), provided a temporary, if self-destructive, escape from the dangers and

⁷⁸The Vietnam War was marked by U.S. involvement as guarantor of South Vietnam and its replacing France as the target for those Vietnamese determined to end white colonial rule and unify their country.

⁷⁹Source: Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census; *U.S. Census of Population: 1960, Vol. I*

⁸⁰Based on percentages reported in *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social, and Military History*. Ed. Spencer C. Tucker. Oxford, UK: ABC-CLIO, 1998.

turbulence surrounding them not only in the jungles and rice paddies of Asian theaters of combat but also in the inner cities and suburbs of the American mainland. Succumbing to these pressures, many African American women, whether they were deployed as nurses or soldiers in Vietnam or remained at home to raise families and/or pursue their education and careers, fell victim to this culture of “pill taking,” which Sanchez’s poem urges them to abandon.

Sanchez also uses “pill taking” to allude to the advent of legalized birth control in the United States, in the form of the birth control pill. Although the introduction of the birth control pill in 1960⁸¹ signaled advances not only in technology but also, correspondingly, in women’s rights, it marked another constraint on African American women. Referring to the fact that the earliest participants in birth control clinical trials were women of color,⁸² Frances Beale explains:

We condemn this use of the black woman as a medical testing ground for the white middle class. Reports of the ill effects, including deaths, from the use of the birth control pill only started to come to light when the white privileged class began to be affected.

These outrageous Nazi-like procedures on the part of medical researchers are but another manifestation of the totally amoral and dehumanizing brutality that the capitalist system perpetrates on black women. (152)

Similarly, Sanchez views “the pill” as a way of curbing black women’s reproduction, and thus part of a long legacy of medically controlling black bodies.

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks (2010) tells the story of a poor African American woman who succumbed to cancer more than sixty years ago. Before she died, however, and

⁸¹On May 11, 1960, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved G.D. Searle and Company Pharmaceutical Corporation’s formulation of the birth control pill, under the name Envoid (Source: “Timeline: The Pill.” *American Experience*. PBS Online. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pill/timeline/index>).

⁸²The first human subjects of birth control clinical trials were women in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and later in Haiti and Mexico (Source: “Timeline: The Pill.” *American Experience*. PBS Online. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pill/timeline/index>).

without her knowledge, scientists took her cells, and have kept them alive for scientific experimentation. Lacks's family did not learn of her "immortality" until some twenty years after her death, when scientists began using her husband and children in experimental research, without their informed consent (Skloot). Moreover, *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment* (1981), details the stories of poor African American men who were given a placebo drug in place of actual medicines to cure their syphilis, all for the purpose of studying how African American men's bodies react to this disease (Jones). Similar histories may well have resonated with Sanchez in her earlier published condemnation of "this crackerized country," which, she asserts, "has dealt on [African American women] and colonized [African American women] body and soul" (Sanchez 12). For Sanchez, "the pill" is but one aspect of the bitter history beyond which African American women must move.

An equally important issue is that of *how* black women should move. Since, as the "pill taking" references suggest, black women historically have been objectified on the basis of their gendered and racial differences, Sanchez implores them to use their bodies, which have mapped negative perceptions, to affect positive change. She writes that "Black/woooomen" are "the only QUEENS OF THE UNIVERSE, even though / we be stepping unqueenly sometimes. like it ain't / easy being a queen in this unrighteous world / full of miss annes and mr. annes. / but we steadily trying" (12). Sanchez uses the term "mr. annes" to undermine white patriarchal authority. Rather than the woman's typical assumption of her husband's name, Sanchez reverses the hierarchy and recasts the man in this role. By inventing this pejorative term, Sanchez clearly suggests that an American society dominated by "miss annes" and "mr. annes," or by white women and white men, causes black women to act out their frustration in the public sphere. Rather than acting out of anger and frustration over a "crackerized country" that "has dealt on us

and colonized us body and soul [. . .], the job of Black/woooooomen is to deal with this under the direction of Black men" (12). In a society in which they are doubly oppressed, black women's agenda, according to Sanchez, is to support black men in a type of performance through which they gain distinct positions of power. She continues, "for Black/woooooomen / are the key. and our reward will be / seeing our warrior sons and beautiful young / sisters moving in human/nationalistic/ [/] revolutionary/ways toward each other. & the enemy" (12).

For Sanchez, the roles black women perform as mothers are the most important of all to the Women's Liberation and Black Power Movements. Her valorization of black motherhood stems from the fact that although, historically, enslaved African women "had only slight biological claim on the institution of motherhood" due to the fact that white society restricted them to the market economy of cash crops and the slave-labor force (Tate 25), they used even this position of subjectivity to enact agency. Such women would include the writers Harriet E. Wilson and Harriet A. Jacobs, whose respective novels, *Our Nig; or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black* (1859) and *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), give voice to the way enslaved African mothers often felt forced to use their sexually objectified bodies to barter for their children's future security and survival.

Sanchez sees this politicization of black mothers as empowering. Similarly, Angela Davis writes, "by virtue of her participation in production," and "[a]s the center of domestic life, the only life at all removed from the arena of exploitation," the black woman constitutes "an important source of survival" and plays "a vital role in nurturing the thrust towards freedom" (212). Sanchez echoes this sentiment in her plea to black women. The words behind her manifesto, according to poet and Broadside Press founder Dudley Randall, "were changing the

culture" (Clarke 10), by encouraging black women to understand their inherent power as mothers and nurturers of the men and women who will become future leaders.

Even Sanchez's reference to "sisters calling in the nite screeeeamen / an arethasong" (13) recalls the Black Arts and Women's Liberation Movements. Franklin⁸³ is arguably the iconic voice during the 1960s of a generation of African Americans. Sanchez's fellow Black Arts Movement poet Nikki Giovanni pays homage to the iconic Franklin in "Another Aretha Poem." Giovanni reflects that "Aretha Franklin took that sound of those pains and hopes and / confessions and love, and Aretha Franklin lifted her voice in question / and complaint and why not and we're going to and voiced the needs of a generation" (37). Where Giovanni sees Franklin as the voice of an entire generation of women of various races and ethnicities, Sanchez, however, praises her for particularly uplifting black women, for empowering black women to assert their liberation from black men and white women who often fail to see their struggles as compounded by both their gender and their race. Indeed, Franklin's album that features "Respect" (1967), which became an anthem of both civil rights activists and feminists, speaks to the historic pain and anguish black women have endured ("Drown in My Own Tears," "Save Me," "Don't Let Me Lose this Dream") while simultaneously inspiring them to find their own inner strength ("Good Times," "A Change is Gonna Come," "Respect").

The cover of this album, entitled *I Never Loved a Man the Way I Loved You*, features Franklin, by then known as the "Queen of Soul," with somber, downcast eyes, hair swept up and away from her face, bare shoulders, and a curvaceous body swathed in an ultra-feminine dress made of white feathers.⁸⁴ This image of Franklin informs Sanchez's decision to cast the iconic singer as a powerful blues woman. In *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History* (2002),

⁸³See Franklin's autobiography, *Aretha: From these Roots*, in which she reveals her roots in gospel music, to which she attributes her success in the rhythm and blues genre. (co-authored with David Ritz. New York: Villard, 1999).

⁸⁴See album photo cover, Image 3.1, in appendix.

editors Deborah Willis and Carla Williams cite early blues women -- including Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Lucille Bogan, and Bessie Smith -- as examples of black women musicians who "have made strong public statements about their bodies" (112). Franklin captures the sexual and personal power of these songstresses. In effect, Franklin shows herself as heir to and vector of a tradition of women musicians who recognize the power that emanates from their lyrics, especially when buoyed by their images as sexual beings. Sanchez recognizes Franklin's political prowess in this regard. Franklin's music melds a distinct blues and jazz aesthetics in its lament of black women who -- from centuries of being used, abused, misjudged, and misunderstood -- carry broken hearts yet mighty spirits, much like the "blue black," yet "magical" women Sanchez addresses in her poetry.

Sanchez implores black women to "loook / at our past. not be angered at it. nor upset" (16) and to:

learNNN.

moove on passSST. Because

waiting for us all if we begin to deal

honestly with each other.

in love ways. in trust.

there's waiting for us.

a Nation. a place for our

BLACKNESS (17).

Sanchez's indentation of and extended vowel sound in the phrase "we must loook," emphasize her impassioned plea for Black women to take action. An interesting paradox in these preceding lines is that Sanchez punctuates her non-traditional free verse style with a traditional anapestic

foot, which stresses the words "loook," "past," "[ANgered]," and "up[SET]" (emphasis added). In effect, Sanchez commands Black "woooomen" to take action, first by "loook"ing back at a shared history of racial and gendered oppression. Secondary to this command is an implicit imperative for Black "woooomen" to spend time reflecting on this shared heritage.

Sanchez's use of caesura, in the way she centers the word "learNNN" within the context of "loooOK"ing back and "moove"ing past being angry, reinforces the idea that only through a shared knowledge of history can Black women collectively move beyond being "[AN]gered or "upSET." She suggests that being educated about their history of racial and gendered oppression will help Black women ". . . begin to deal / honestly with each other. in love ways. in trust" (17). Sanchez brackets or frames the phrases "in love ways. in trust" with white space in order to emphasize the idea that these solitary ideals, love and trust, germinate from a shared knowledge of history. Moreover, by both centering these two phrases and punctuating each with a period, Sanchez creates an abrupt, emphatic declaration, which, when juxtaposed with the previous phrases -- "not be angered [at the past]. nor upset" -- offers the principles of love and trust as the primary ingredients for establishing a community in which black women can overcome their anger at a bitter past of race and gender oppression.

The birth of this idyllic community, Sanchez implies, rests on the shoulders of black women "since we are the moral keepers/ teachers/nurses/civilizers" (17). Sanchez's description of black women as "moral keepers/ teachers/nurses/civilizers" correlates with images of domesticity, respectability, and religious piety cultivated by women in the Nation of Islam: A member of the Nation of Islam from 1972-1975, Sanchez had been actively involved for two years⁸⁵ at the time in which she wrote *A Blues Book*. In the photograph on the back cover of *A*

⁸⁵(Source: "Sonia Sanchez." *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*. New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997. 1902-1903. Print.)

Blues Book,⁸⁶ Sanchez stands behind one of her twin sons⁸⁷ while holding the other in a protective embrace. Her sons wear short-sleeved, white, collared, dress shirts with black bow ties, while she wears a dark, long-sleeved smock. The book cover image of Sanchez and her sons rhymes with other representations of gender roles in the Nation of Islam circulating during the time she wrote *A Blues Book*. For example, a photograph of Malcolm X and other members of the Nation of Islam shows the men and women dressed conservatively: The men wear dark suits with white shirts and either black or white neckties, and the women wear white habits, white dresses, or white shirts and skirts, and white gloves.⁸⁸ These images complement the writings of other Nation of Islam members, such as Sister Shirley Moton. In her article, entitled “What the Teachings of the Messenger Mean to Women,” Moton writes, “I wear the clothes of a civilized people. My dresses are far below my knees and I love it. This makes me respect myself better but it also makes other people respect me. In all the civilized nations of the world, the civilized woman wears dresses down to her ankles. Only uncivilized women feel they have to be half naked” (25). These examples explain how the Nation of Islam seeks to foster within its members a sense of self-respect, which leads to self-empowerment. These regulations mean to empower black women in Islam.

Sanchez’s allusions to both Aretha Franklin and the community of women in the Nation of Islam echo Anna Julia Cooper’s⁸⁹ and other black feminists’ literary and cultural feminist positions, which claimed that the black woman’s history of marginalization makes her “all the

⁸⁶See back photo cover for *A Blues Book*, Image 3.2, in appendix.

⁸⁷Sanchez’s twin sons -- Mungu and Morani -- and her daughter -- Anita -- were born during her brief marriage to her fellow Black Arts Movement poet Etheridge Knight. (Source: Salaam, Kalamu ya. “Sonia Sanchez.” *Afro-American Poets Since 1955*. Eds. Trudier Harris-Lopez and Thadious M. Davis. Detroit: Gale Research 1985. *Dictionary of Literary Biography* Vol. 41. *Literature Resource Center*. Web 22 Dec. 2011. <http://go.galegroup.com.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1200001955&v=2.1&u=uga&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.)

⁸⁸See photograph, Image 3.3, in appendix.

⁸⁹Cooper published the first book-length feminist text, *A Voice from the South, by a Black Woman of the South*, in 1892. (Xenia, OH: Aldine Printing House. 1892)

better qualified . . . to weigh and judge and advise" (138). In her essay "The Status of Woman in America" (1892), Cooper asserts that the black woman, especially, "has been known to cling blindly with the instinct of a turtle dove to those principles and policies which to her mind promise hope and safety for children yet unborn" (139). As a result of moving "in love ways. in trust[,]" Sanchez similarly writes, black women should achieve the ultimate goal of finding "a Nation. a place for our / BLACKNESS" (17).

The Nation to which Sanchez refers contains multiple valences. The first, and arguably most obvious, reference is to the concept of Nation as a theoretical place or space where black women reaffirm their value of one another. Secondly, the Nation to which Sanchez refers connotes the Nation of Islam. In a 1989 interview, Sanchez credits the Nation of Islam for its "sense of support of this Blackness. Also at that particular time, too, it was the strongest organization in America. And, so, many [black women] who were [. . .] working very hard, felt an obligation to go [. . .] to the source of the information that we had become familiar with" (*Blackside*). So, for Sanchez and other black women, "the Nation" offered a spiritual space in which black women could reaffirm and recommit themselves to the support of the black community. Finally, Sanchez's use of the term "Nation" echoes the spirit of Pan-Africanism⁹⁰ so popular with African American artists during the Black Arts and Black Power Movements. In fact, Sanchez recalls, "I was called, not a Muslim, but a Pan-Africanist, [during the Black Arts and Black Power Movements]" (Interview), thus reflecting the cultural ethos of many black artists who espoused African Americans' need to follow the example of many post-colonial African countries during this time by divorcing themselves from all things associated with white America

⁹⁰Peter Olisanwuche Esedebe discusses the history of Pan-Africanism, including the development of the Organization of African Unity and its impact on the concepts of black Nationalism, race, and identity among blacks in the Diaspora. (Esedebe. *Pan-Africanism: The Idea and Movement, 1776-1991*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1994.).

and collaborating as black diasporic citizens globally and transnationally to create economic and political acumen.⁹¹ In an interview with *Blackside Press*, Sanchez credits the Nation of Islam for encouraging black people to “do as Du Bois and others in the ‘30’s . . . go and frequent Black businesses. . . . Erect Black businesses. Work for Black folks.”²¹ She points to this "Nation" as a theoretical, spiritual, and political space "waiting for [Black women]" to enter it and move forward in status and influence in their communities (17).

Again, Sanchez's use of caesura is important in this passage:

there's waiting for us.

a Nation. a place for our

BLACKNESS. (17)

The indentation of the middle line -- "a Nation. a place for" -- functions as the obligatory response to the preceding phrase, "there's waiting for us," in which "waiting" suggests both an idyllic space as well as a mythical place, a space "waiting" to be created by and for black women. Ironically, the phrase "there's waiting for us" ends with a period and thus a sense of resolution, but it also entices readers to think forward: "What, exactly, is waiting for us?" Following the phrase "a Nation" with a period, then the phrase "a place," creates a rhythm that underscores the importance of Black women finding this "Nation/place." Similarly, Sanchez's use of white space in this middle line directs readers' attention to the word "our," which reinforces the concept of "Nation" as a communal space. By ending this line with the word "our," Sanchez quickly leads readers to the next line in which she stresses the word "BLACKNESS" both because it is the only word that occupies this line and because she

⁹¹(Sanchez, Sonia. Interview with Sonia Sanchez. *Blackside, Inc.* March 7, 1989. for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads 1965 to 1985*. Washington University Libraries. Film and Media Archive. Henry Hampton Collection.)

capitalizes all of its letters. As well, “BLACKNESS” represents the crescendo at the peak of the rhythmic cadence she delivers in these lines, thus making the word a synonym for the community values that the Nation of Islam espouses and that *A Blues Book* articulates. As a black woman poet and member of the Nation of Islam, Sanchez reminds other black women of the significant roles they play in upholding the values of the black community.

In Part Two of *A Blues Book*, entitled "Past," Sanchez reminisces, "because I was born / musician to two / black braids, I / cut a blue / song for america" (21). Here, Sanchez establishes a connection between being "black [. . . and] blue" or the notion of the blues aesthetic that has been elaborated in such theoretical works as Houston A. Baker, Jr.'s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* (1987), which refers to being of African descent in America, yet being displaced and dispossessed from either place. This blues aesthetic connotes a sense of loss and abandonment that speaks to the collective historical oppression of African Americans. More specifically, in tracing her own history, Sanchez summons the persona of her earth mother and asks her to "come ride [her] birth," to come and lead her on this journey into her past, and to come and "tell [her] how [she has] become, became / this woman with razor blades between her teeth" (23). Sanchez's reference to her earth mother and her description of becoming "this woman with razor blades between her teeth" pay homage to the Hindu goddess Kali,⁹² the primordial life force that is present everywhere and within everyone.⁹³

Richard Chambers Prescott says the goddess Kali represents the importance of non-dualism because she embodies the primal energy from which all of life and its experiences originate – birth and death, male and female, love and hate, and all forces in-between (*Measuring*). Although Kali is a Hindu goddess, African American women writers invoke her as

⁹²See depictions of Hindu goddess Kali, Image 3.4, in Appendix.

a symbol of African American female power for many reasons. In her poem entitled “to a dark moses,” Lucille Clifton describes Kali as:

queen of fatality, she
 determines the destiny of things. nemesis.
 the permanent guest within ourselves.
 woman of warfare,
 of the chase, bitch
 of blood sacrifice and death.
 dread mother. the mystery
 ever present in us and
 outside us. The
 terrible hindu woman woman God.
 Kali.
 who is black. (128)

Most representations of Kali depict her with black skin and long, thick braided hair. Also, as the goddess of fatality, warfare, blood sacrifice, and death, most images also depict her holding a spear, as if in battle; stretching her eyes wide and tongue long, as if they, too, are weapons; and standing on top of a man, presumably a man whom she has slain. She is the mythical giver and taker of life. Sanchez’s reference to her earth mother as a Kali-like, all-powerful being, who can “sing” Sanchez’s history and, consequently, connect her with her past, offers a compelling representation of this deity.

The ultimate homage to the Hindu goddess Kali lies in Sanchez’s description of herself as having become “this woman with razor blades between her teeth.” Effectively, she sees herself

as the life force engendered by the goddess. She will continue the work of her mother/goddess along her journey from being an innocent child to becoming a dangerous black woman poet whose words serve as her weapon of choice against patriarchal institutions. Audre Lorde depicts a similar image in her poem entitled "Dahomey":

Bearing two drums on my head I speak
 whatever language is needed
 to sharpen the knives of my tongue
 the snake is aware although sleeping
 under my blood
 since I am a woman whether or not
 you are against me
 I will braid my hair
 even
 in the seasons of rain. (11)

For Sanchez and other African American women writers like Clifton and Lorde, Kali represents the source of their unconquerable strength. Appropriately, they use their tongues, i.e. words, to empower those inside the African American community and to overcome the oppressive forces on the outside.

Sanchez divides Part Two, "Past," into five sections: 1) woman, 2) earth mother, 3) young/black/girl, 4) young womanhood, and 5) womanhood. In each section, Sanchez enacts the voice of each persona. For example, in the first section, Sanchez, as "woman," uses apostrophe in beseeching her earth mother's wisdom and guidance. She pleads, "tellLLLLLL me. earth mother / for i want to rediscover me. the secret of me / the river of me. . . / i want my body to

carry my words like aqueducts" (23). Here, Sanchez's woman-centered language reflects how she must literally and figuratively write herself into existence. She views her body as a metaphorical reservoir of knowledge from which should pour forth words of wisdom and knowledge for and about African people and their shared African culture. Sanchez invokes her earth mother to "rise up [. . .] / out of rope-strung-trees / dancing a windless dance" (23). As the historian Leon F. Litwack writes, "In the 1890s, lynchings claimed an average of 139 lives each year, 75 percent of them black. The numbers declined in the following decades, but the percentage of black victims rose to 90%" ("Hellhounds"). Sanchez's earth mother encompasses the spirits of the countless African Americans lynched and left hanging from trees at the height of racial unrest in America during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The "windless dance" Sanchez describes represents not only the stillness of the dead bodies as they hung lifeless, swaying from the trees, but also their spirits who live on in that of the earth mother.

Sanchez continues, "dance me a breakfast of births / let your mouth spill me forth / so i creak with your mornings." By asking her earth mother to "spill [her] forth," Sanchez beseeches her to breathe the life of those departed spirits into her body so she, like an aqueduct, can carry them with her. Sanchez then relies on homonyms to enter into an intriguing word play. In channeling the spirit of her earth mother, Sanchez envisions she will "creak," meaning to become like a "creek," to flow with the "mornings," or "mournings," and expressions of grief for the African American lives so violently lost to American racism. The "mornings"/"mournings" of Sanchez's earth mother signal the memory of those dead black bodies, which Sanchez hopes to carry with her so that she can be enlightened by their histories, and can enlighten future generations about their stories.

Referencing West African performative elements, Sanchez pleads for her earth mother to "sing [her her] history" (23): "*Bells. bells. bells. / let the bells ring. / BELLS. BELLS. BELLS /* ring the bells to announce / this your earth mother. / for the day is turning / in my thighs And you are born BLACK GIRL" (24). Sanchez's annunciation of her earth mother turns *A Blues Book* from reflection of the African American blues aesthetic to an allusion to a distinctly African cultural aesthetic. Each cultural group comprising the vast continent of Africa practices a distinct type of music and dance; and "some sing and dance wearing ankle bells; others sing, drum, and dance" (Nketia 49). In West Africa, for example, members of the Akan, Ewe, and Hausa groups most commonly use variations of bells, rattles, and drums (49). Dancers in the aforementioned cultural groups frequently adorn ankle bells to "emphasize and develop those features that can be articulated in bodily movement" (206).

In many ways, Sanchez's earth mother suggests the specific womenfolk of the Gelede people in the Ketu-Yoruba subgroup of West Africa. Benedict Ibitokun identifies the Gelede womenfolk as a small cross-section of women "who have reached the menopausal age and are endowed with mystic, supernatural powers. They are called 'our mothers, iya un,' aye un,' and they are the real owners of Gelede" (38). A female liberation celebration, Gelede pays respect and devotion to the elder womenfolk of the community for their fortitude as the virtual "givers of life" who have "paved the way" for younger generations and, therefore, are imbued with certain heroic, i.e. "supernatural," powers.

Sanchez's earth mother occupies a unique space as a deific figure in an American society where, similar to the Ketu-Yoruba society of the Gelede womenfolk, women's roles as child-bearers have been privileged. Sanchez, like the Ketu women, heeds the imperative "for the female sex to put up offensive and defensive strategies so as to counter psycho-social and

political lopsidedness" (37). Through the dialogue Sanchez creates between her young/Black/girl persona and her earth mother persona, Sanchez enacts a dramatic performance, similar to Gelede, which both protects and defends the honor of Africana womenfolk as the hub of society. One major difference between Gelede and Sanchez's "earth mother" performance is that Gelede typically features male dancers portraying goddesses. For this reason, my comparison of Sanchez's enactment of the "earth mother" persona may appear problematic. I posit, however, that the male dancers' portrayal of goddesses emphasizes the notion that they, like Sanchez, recognize the importance of women in their culture. From this perspective, Sanchez's enactment of the "earth mother" calls Africana women to recognize their importance, in particular in patriarchal societies such as America and the Nation of Islam.

Thus commanding the scene, Sanchez/the earth mother "sings" or predicts the young girl persona's birth and childhood: "i can see you coming / girl made of black braids / i can see you coming / in the arena of youth / girl shaking your butt to double dutch days / i can see you coming" (25). Although "both white and black girls and boys jump double-dutch, traditionally double-dutch has been associated especially with the lives of African American girls, who have been instrumental in artistically crafting and culturally transforming this folk activity into a sophisticated performance" (Lee 2). As a game that "requires the jumpers to simultaneously locate themselves between ropes" (3), double-dutch functions as a metaphor for African Americans, who must simultaneously locate themselves between their African heritage and the European influences in America. This type of complex negotiation results in "a more integrated performance" (3) of racial and gender subjectivity, and is reminiscent of W. E. B. Du Bois's concept of double-consciousness, or sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others (8).

The “earth mother” and “young/black/girl” personae Sanchez dons enter into a metaphorical freestyle dance, each taking a turn within the circle, or cycle, of life to express herself. Following the earth mother's song, Sanchez shifts to the voice of the young/black/girl, who recalls attending parties “where we'd grinddddDDDD / and grinddddDDDD / but not too close / cuz if you gave it up / everybody would know. and tell” (28). The onomatopoeic “grinddddDDDD” refers to the simulation of sexual intercourse, being on the verge of losing virginity and entering adulthood, but not losing one’s virginity for fear of becoming the subject of gossip, and also out of reverence for the African American community’s values of chastity and respectability. In this particular reference, Sanchez's use of the slash or virgule re-emphasizes the persona of the young/black/girl who arguably faces, or stands to face, triple marginalization on the basis of her youthful inexperience, as well as her race and gender. These very attributes Sanchez intimates fuel the young black girl's thirst and hunger for life. In the young girl’s persona, Sanchez forecasts the voices of so-called third-wave feminists,⁹⁴ who engage these very markers of difference – in addition to class -- to offer a more progressive feminist approach than earlier feminists in their sensitivities to intellectual currents, along with transnational, multiracial, and sexual politics.

As the young black girl recalls, she “could not hear [her own] footsteps in the streets / could not hear the rhythm of young Black womanhood” (29). Her sentiment echoes Ashanti girls' nubility rites, during which, as Kumasi Bishop Peter Sarpong describes, adult women of the Ashanti tribe perform a music and dance celebration of the coming-of-age and entry into womanhood of girls in their group (23). Sarpong explains the Ashanti girls' nubility musical

⁹⁴ Nancy Hewitt’s *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminisms* attempts to eliminate the seemingly exclusive “wave” term to describe the development of feminist ideologies. She seeks, instead, to show the interrelatedness of all feminist theories and that their practices defy a strict chronological classification. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2010.).

performance as a "life dance," the music of which is "[characterized] by strong rhythm and amazing forte fortes, with intermittent crescendos and very quick tempo" (25). Similarly, Sanchez/"young black girl" introduces this section with quick, rhythmic counting: "fivetenfifteen / twentyfivethirtythirtyfiveforty / fortyfivefiftyfiftyfivesixty / sixtyfiveseventy / seventyfiveeighty / eightyfiveninety / ninetyfiveonehundredreadyornother i come / REAdyornothericome!" (26). The enjambment of the numbers in this section creates a fast-paced rhythm and recalls a childhood game of hide-and-seek. Moreover, the quick tempo and the recreation of the children's game create a tandem effect of a life dance, which Sanchez/"young/black/girl" underscores with the intermittent refrain, "*no matter what they do / they won't find me / no matter what they say / i won't come out*" (26 author's emphasis). This refrain, which Sanchez/"young/black/girl" indicates is "to/be/chanted" (26) creates a crescendo effect within the "young/black/girl's" life dance. The quick tempo of the children's game represents the time that passes as Sanchez/"young/black/girl" develops into the "young womanhood" persona she presents in section four.

Entitled "young womanhood," Section Four represents the psychological tension that results from Sanchez, as the "young/black/girl," dressing herself in "foreign words" (31) and becoming "a proper painted / european Black faced american" (31). The "young/black/girl" adopts the foreign words and values of the respective English language and European culture forced upon her. In this liminal status, she has "danced with white friends who / included [her] because that was /the nice thing to do in the late / fifties and early sixties" (32) as America, too, transitioned into a post-modern society. This phrase, as well, suggests the young woman's psychological tension. She acknowledges interacting with white friends; however, she views the friendship as a type of dance, a performance of her acceptance in American society, where the

English language she speaks and the popular style of dress she wears are mere props to mask the fact that her African heritage yields her liminal status in America.

The young woman's voice arguably belongs less to a mainstream American community than to a marginalized Black Nationalist one. Sanchez employs synecdoche by having the young woman's "i" represent the countless Africans forcibly removed to American soil and the elements of their respective cultures lost among the Diaspora. Hers is the voice of an African Diaspora, speaking of many of her cultural elements diluted over the Middle Passage. In addition, she speaks in the voice of a personified, if downtrodden, American society, one torn apart by the political and social unrest that characterized this post-World War Two country during the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In the final section of Sanchez's reflection on her past, she acknowledges her awakening into womanhood. As indicated in the first lines of this section, Sanchez recalls "moving. constantly. / some destiny calling / out to [her / to explore the sea / and the sky" (38). Symbolically, the sea represents the Atlantic Ocean, the "Black Atlantic," as Paul Gilroy calls it in homage to the countless Africans who did not survive their triangular voyage from Africa to America and the Caribbean.⁹⁵ Similarly, "the sky" represents a sense of heaven on earth. Many African American spirituals feature references to Canaan, encoded as "Canaan" or "Canaan land," which represents this paradisiacal place where African people can live freely, beyond the institution of slavery, and perhaps even reunite as a larger community. There are limitless possibilities to what African Americans can bring about on land, among the living, as a result of knowing their shared history and working collaboratively to support a sense of Nationhood within the African American community. Sanchez, in her womanhood, heeds the call of a

⁹⁵See Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993.

personified destiny to explore, to learn, and even to articulate, the history and legacy of her African ancestors.

Sanchez's introduction to the Nation of Islam has catalyzed her transition into womanhood, for in this phase of her life, Sanchez acknowledges, she "gave birth to [herself], / twice. in one hour" (39). Sanchez confirms that she "became like Maat, / unalterable in [her] love of Black self and / righteousness" (39). The Egyptian goddess Maat, represents peace, balance, and harmony.⁹⁶ According to Egyptian mythology, if the three aforementioned principles of Maat are disturbed, irreversible chaos will ensue. Similarly, Sanchez recognizes the reality of both her Blackness and her womanhood as aspects of her identity that will cause her self-destruction if not affirmed and cherished. She thus equates the harmony and "righteousness" of Maat to true love of self. She accepts her presumed role as goddess, or African Queen, whose duty is "making the country keep in step / to these our new sounds" (38). These "new sounds" are those enlightened black voices that, empowered by the Black Power Movement, create Maatian harmony that is "the music of a / million Black souls" (38).

In her culminating Part Three, entitled "Present," Sanchez uses her dancing body as a moving symbol, literally, of the strong influence that John Coltrane, as a representative of jazz culture, has had on her mind, body, and spirit. In his 1964 album, entitled *A Love Supreme*, Coltrane's lyrics "became musical scripture to many poets, novelists, and playwrights." Movement, for Sanchez, signals a physiological response to this jazz saxophonist, whose legendary form of "free-jazz," according to the literary critic Kimberly W. Benston, inspired a distinct genre, the "Coltrane poem," because of "his crosscultural interests, in addition to his

⁹⁶See also Karenga, Maulana. *Maat: The Moral Ideal in Ancient Egypt: A Study in Classical African Ethics*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.

search for a life contrary to the sterility of the mainstream" (773).⁹⁷ In fact, Sanchez and other Black Arts Movement poets -- as well as more contemporary artists -- pay tribute to Coltrane for the impact of his music on their poetry and on American culture.⁹⁸

Buoyed by the music of this jazz icon, Sanchez bursts forth enlivened and motivated, so much so that she becomes "all mouth," (41) to inspire a new generation of activists and artists. In a spontaneous response, Sanchez describes her "buttocks moving like palm trees" (41) as she rains "rhythms of blue/black/smiles" (41). Her words reflect, like Coltrane's happy/sad music, the blues hidden behind the smiles of African American women, who have, often out of necessity, honed the skill of dissembling their most personal business - these "pleasures without tongues" (41).⁹⁹ The feminist historian Darlene Clark Hine defines "dissemblance" as "the behavior and attributes of black women that created the appearance of openness and disclosure, but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors" (380). So, while the movement of this "honeycoatedalabamianwoman" reflects, on one hand, a superficially happy demeanor, it also masks a deeper sorrow stemming from her gender's history of being forcibly removed from Africa, then transplanted to, yet abandoned in, America: the blues of a sorrowful Black people who smile to mask their history of pain.

⁹⁷(Benston, Kimberly W. "Late Coltrane: A Re-Membering of Orpheus." *The Massachusetts Review*. Vol. 18, No. 4. (Winter, 1977). 770-781. Print. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/stable/25088812>.

⁹⁸Specific poems from the Black Arts Movement that pay tribute to Coltrane include Jayne Cortez's "How Long Has Trane Been Gone" (Source: *Pissstained Stairs and the Monkey Man's Wares*. New York: Phrase Text, 1969. Print.); Carolyn Rodgers's "Jesus Was Crucified" (Source: *Songs of a Black Bird*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1969. Print.); A. B. Spellman's "Did John's Music Kill Him?" (Source: *Black Music, Four Lives: Four Lives in the Bebop Business*. New York: Schocken Books, 1970. Print.); and Haki R. Madhubuti's "a poem to complement other poems" (Source: *Don't Cry, Scream*. Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969. Print.). More contemporary works evincing Coltrane's lingering impact on poetry and prose include Michael S. Harper's *Dear John, Dear Coltrane: Poems by Michael S. Harper* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970. Print.) and "John Coltrane Arrived with an Egyptian Lady" (Mackey and Art Lange, eds. *Moment's Notice: Jazz in Poetry and Prose*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1993. Print.).

⁹⁹See Hine. "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance." (*Words of Fire: An Anthology of African-American Feminist Thought*. Ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftall. New York: The New York Press, 1995. 380. Print.)

Upon arriving to Africa or the metaphorical “place of [her] birth” in Part Four, or “Rebirth,” of her book, Sanchez uses dance as a metaphor for spiritual and psychological growth and wholeness. Sanchez describes dance as “new and my thighs / burning like chords / left a trail for others to follow when / they returned home as all must sure do to make / past future tense” (45). Her legs extend to earth in a grounded posture, which Barbara S. Glass has identified as a distinct characteristic of African dance.¹⁰⁰ With bare feet planted firmly in the ground, African dancers feel a stronger connection to the earth, where their ancestors' remains are interred, although their spirits rest in heaven. Sanchez's burning thighs represent her presence on the African continent, literally and figuratively, and the path she has carved for others to follow in coming “home” to this mythical place where she now follows the trail her ancestors left for her.

Sanchez's African dance motif romanticizes her African homeland. Although she clearly has identified herself in the preceding parts of the book as “coming out from alabama” (28-29) and a “honeycoatedalabamianwoman” (41), Africa becomes the place she proudly, really, calls “home.” For Sanchez, Africa is her “place / of birth where the warm/blue/green seas cradle / [her] blackness”; they awaken in her constant movement, literally and figuratively, toward her African homeland. Similar to the “low beating of the tom toms” that “stirs [the] blood” in Langston Hughes's poem “Danse Africaine,”¹⁰¹ “the ritual beat of the sun and sea / made [Sanchez's] body smile” (46). Essentially, Sanchez becomes entranced by the rhythms of home. Here, she experiences her spiritual rebirth.

¹⁰⁰Glass distinguishes between the grounded posture associated with of African-derived dance and the erect posture associated with European-style dance. (See Glass. *African-American Dance: An Illustrated History*. Jefferson, North Carolina; London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2007. Print.

¹⁰¹First published in the August 1922 issue of the *Crisis*, “Danse Africaine” was reprinted in *The Weary Blues* (1926). (New York: Knopf)

Sanchez concludes *A Blues Book* in Part Five, entitled "Future." Herein, she creates a movement motif grounded in an African sense of time. She proclaims, "WE ARE MUSLIM WOMEN / moving in the ark of time" (58), as if to suggest the Bakongo concept of cyclical time,¹⁰² which fosters the belief that "man's life has no end, that it constitutes a cycle, and death is merely a transition in the process of change" (Janzen and MacGaffey 34). This concept opposes the Western concept of linear time. Moreover, Sanchez reinforces this idea of moving in African rather than European time by commanding, "Sing to [conjure up the spirit of] Him who / came in the person of Master Fard Muhammad" (58) and "bow down upon the earth before Elijah / the Lord of our changing Seasons" (58). Sanchez's reference to singing and bowing down reflect an African custom of calling the spirits through song and dance, and bowing down before them in reverence. Her choice to capitalize "Seasons" reflects the Bantu-Congo concept of the "four moments of the sun" -- birth, death, afterworld, and rebirth -- which represent the four seasons of life. Represented in Bakongo culture on a cosmogram, these movements, or seasons, evolve not in a linear format, but counterclockwise. In *Flash of the Spirit* (1983), Robert Farris Thompson explains the significance of the cosmogram: "an ideal balancing of the vitality of the world of the living with the visionariness (*sic*) of the world of the dead" (106). Similarly, as Sanchez repeats the command to "let us begin again the / circle of Blackness" (61), she intimates the circular formation of the West African Ring Shout in which Africans, including African slaves, moved counterclockwise in a circle, chanting and calling on the spirits of their ancestors. As a result, "the earth hums as [they] walk" (58), thus indicating not only that they have channeled the spirits of their ancestors but also that they have carried these spirits with them to America.

¹⁰²In *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1983), Robert Farris Thompson clarifies that the name "Bakongo" designates "any person brought from the west coast of Central Africa to America" (New York: Random House. 103).

Sanchez functions as a griot who takes black women on an historical journey, from their African heritage to the unique space they occupy as heirs to their rich ancestral legacy. She offers her own life's story to map this journey, and she punctuates each phase with some type of literal or figurative movement. Sanchez summons the spirit of her earth mother to move within her so that she can recall her own spiritual journey. Channeling her earth mother, Sanchez moves, literally, between various personae as she charts her own development from "young/black/girl" to "young womanhood" to "womanhood." Moving from one phase of her development to the next, Sanchez underscores the importance of black women moving, figuratively, toward a greater understanding of self and their significance in the black community. Summarily, Sanchez uses movement to define a shared African heritage, and she calls black women to move, literally, in establishing a community to further the cause of black nationalism.

CHAPTER 5

A DANCE FOR MY SISTERS: NTOZAKE SHANGE'S *FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE
CONSIDERED SUICIDE WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF*

In many ways, the Black Arts and Black Power Movements were about extending boundaries. As tributaries of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Arts and Black Power Movements challenged the status quo and gave voice to historically disenfranchised groups, including women and African Americans. An integral voice within these movements, Ntozake Shange extends the boundaries of poetry, dance, and drama and melds these genres into one cohesive unit in her 1975 work, *for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf*, which she subtitles a choreopoem. As its name implies, the choreopoem relies heavily on dance as the primary vehicle of expression. My interpretation of *for colored girls* is significant for three main reasons. First, I underscore how dance is a vehicle of expression within the African American vernacular tradition. Secondly, since the performance of *for colored girls* resembles the call-and-response element of West African female initiation rituals among Ashanti girls in Ghana and the Vai Sande women of Liberia and Sierra Leone, I demonstrate how dance is a site of cultural memory within the play. Finally, the collective vignettes performed by anonymous “colored girls” represent the relevance of the narrative to any woman of color; and, in so doing, they emphasize the importance of communities fostered by women of color for their own survival.

In groups such as the Ashanti girls in Ghana and the Vai Sande women of Liberia and Sierra Leone, the mandatory coming-of-age ceremony for young girls marks that they are ready to accept adult roles in their communities. Each initiation ritual features the interaction between

elder women and a young girl. Once the youth demonstrates – usually through some type of performance – that she is fit to enter the sanctum of womanhood, the elder women signal their approval by welcoming her into their sacred female community. This interaction demonstrates the significance of the call-and-response aesthetic to the sense of community at the heart of these coming-of-age initiation rituals. Likewise, *for colored girls* consists of vignettes featuring and/or discussing dances to mark the stages of the narrator's development and the process of her maturation from youth to adulthood.

Although the term “Bildungsroman” generally applies to the novel in its most basic connotation, it refers to “the process through which maturity is achieved through the ups and downs of life” (“Bildungsroman” 81-82). Shange's *for colored girls* consists of twenty such vignettes. Seven nameless black women constitute the cast of characters within the choreopoem and one or more of them performs each scene. Six of the “colored girls” represent different colors of the rainbow; audience members know them only as the lady in yellow, the lady in purple, the lady in red, the lady in green, the lady in blue, and the lady in orange. The other six women perform different life passages experienced by the seventh colored girl, the lady in brown, as she matures from youth to adulthood. The lady in brown provides the reflective commentary that frames the narrative.

Collectively, the vignettes in this choreopoem represent a young black girl's transformation from youth to adulthood. This sense of transformation, according to drama scholar Richard Schechner, “is at the heart of theatre” (199) and generally manifests in two ways: “(1) the displacement of anti-social, injurious, disruptive behavior by ritualized gesture and display, and (2) the invention of characters who act out fictional events or real events fictionalized by virtue of their being acted out” (199). Schechner's study posits that the two

types of transformations occur together; however, while the latter type tends to dominate in Western theater, the former dominates among “Others, non-Westerners, communal peoples, those who have a living oral tradition” (Schechner and Shuman 165), wherein theatre emerges in virtually every aspect of their daily lives. *for colored girls* features both types of transformation. On one hand, Shange invents characters who act out fictional events. On the other hand, by not giving the characters names, Shange focuses more on issues affecting women of color, in general. These issues – such as rape, abortion, infidelity, and other sorts of physical, mental, and emotional abuse -- comprise the anti-social, injurious, disruptive patterns that threaten her overall development and self-actualization. In order to displace these ills, black women use dance as a means of expression and community-building. By privileging the healing potential of dance and community-building, they subvert traditional Western emphasis on written language and individuation. In effect, Shange intimates that Western values comprise the injurious, disruptive behavior that black women must displace.

I can speak firsthand of how ritualized communal activity appears at the core of this displacement. As a participant in The University of Georgia’s West African Study Abroad Program in Ghana, May 12 – June 3, 2008, I attended a naming ceremony in the village of Torgorme. The Abaja – older women – begin this ceremony with a communal dance. Everyone dances the same type of movement: a quick, alternating shuffle-and-kick foot pattern while keeping their hands at their sides with their forearms and hands outstretched, and moving their shoulders up and down in unison. The Abaja perform this dance in a circle, which signifies the importance of community. As well, the way the Abaja move various parts of their body in unison marks the uniquely African aesthetics of polycentricism and ephibism in their

performance.¹⁰³ The children dance next; they enact a battle scene, which begins with their showing respect to the village chief, who is present for the naming ceremony. They move forward toward the chief, kneel to show respect, and move back to their points of origin. Their movements include clapping and kicking to signify battle, and waving their hands to signify victory in battle. Their performance of battle scenes and victory in battle signifies their ultimate quest for success in life. Significantly, more dancing than speaking occurs during this ceremony. The Abaja naming ceremony represents the centrality of women within the family and the lives of the children.

During this ceremony, my Torgorme family gave me the name “Adzo Nutifafa”: “Adzo” means that I am a Monday-born female; “Nutifafa” means “peaceful”; this is the primary character trait that should combat any negative forces in my life. While it may be simple coincidence that my “peaceful” demeanor does accurately describe my personality, I researched my birthdate and found that I was, in fact, born on a Monday. On the whole, these ritualized activities underscore the importance of dance not only as a means of expression but also as a means of galvanizing a community and representing the centrality of women within it. These same dynamics undergird the performance in *for colored girls*.

The call-and-response aesthetic lies at the heart of these ritualized activities. I base my examination of this aesthetic in *for colored girls* on John F. Callahan’s book, entitled *In the African-American Grain: Call-and-Response in Twentieth-Century Black Fiction* (2001). He makes two salient points relative to my analysis. First, he states, “African American writers use

¹⁰³In her book *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (1996), Brenda Dixon Gottschild defines “polycentrism/polyrhythm” as the movement emanating from two or more body parts simultaneously (14), and ephebism (from the Greek word *ephebe*, meaning youth) as the dynamic power, vitality, flexibility, and intensity that underscore the physical movement within a performance. Gottschild cites as an example of ephebism “[o]ld people dancing with youthful vitality” (16) as in the example referenced above. (Westport, Connecticut; London: Greenwood P, 14, 16. Print.).

the call-and-response tradition as a bass line in their pursuit of voice, and their work is also a call to other American writers seeking their own voices” (xii). Although Callahan relegates his discussion to the genre of fiction, the choreopoem exemplifies his theory. Shange, who performed the Lady in Orange in the Broadway Opening Night production, admits that *for colored girls* began as a collective effort between herself and four other women¹⁰⁴ who had as their goal “clarifying [their] lives -- & the lives of [their] mothers, daughters, & grandmothers – as women” (x). Similar to the Abaja women’s opening dance, the lady in brown begins the choreopoem by asking the colored girls to “sing a black girl’s song.” Their individual and collective responses, like the Torgorme children’s battle scene performance, function as the response to the brown girl’s, or the Abaja’s, initial dance/call, each representing a different phase, or “phrase,” of the black girl’s song. Collectively, their responses give voice to the various experiences of black women.

The call-and-response aesthetic in *for colored girls* references three main elements of African storytelling.¹⁰⁵ At the core of African storytelling is “the constant audience commentary and periodic introduction of call-and-response songs” (14). The same element lies also at the heart of *for colored girls*. Since the colored girls respond to the lady in brown’s request for them to “sing a black girl’s song” (4), the stories they tell represent their commentaries on the lives of black women and become a collective response to the lady in brown’s call. Owing to the performative nature of African storytelling, Abrahams acknowledges, “the spoken word can actually create bonds and bring about personal or social transformation” (14). The same is true

¹⁰⁴The initial group of women who presented *for colored girls* included Paula Moss, who was the choreographer and went on to perform the Lady in Green in the Broadway Opening Night production; Elvia Marta, who, along with Moss, worked with Shange in Raymond Sawyer’s Afro-American Dance Company and Halifu’s The Spirit of the Dance; Nashira Ntosh, a guitarist and program coordinator at KPOO-FM, one of the few Bay Area stations focusing on women’s programming; Jessica Hagedorn, a poet and reading tour companion; and Joanna Griffin, poet, publisher of Effie’s Press, and co-founder of the Bachanal, a women’s bar where *for colored girls* was first presented in December of 1974. See photograph, Image 4.1, in Appendix.

¹⁰⁵See Roger D. Abrahams, *African Folktales: Selected and Retold* (New York: Pantheon, 1983. Print.).

of *for colored girls*. The call-and-response aesthetic in this choreopoem fosters a community that nurtures Africana women in their journeys toward self-actualization. Finally, stories in the African setting, Abrahams points out, are told “not just to deliver a message, but to initiate talk about that message” (9). Likewise, *for colored girls* is the first work to combine poetry, music, and dance to render stories by and about black women. Because of this originality, it initiates conversations among students of African American women’s literature, drama, and culture about black women’s lived experiences.

My observations of expressions of West African ritual dance within *for colored girls* are supported by how Shange established an interest in dance and West African culture well before she wrote the play. She attributes this appreciation to her work in 1974 with the choreographer Ed Mock and with Raymond Sawyer’s Afro-American Dance Company:

[S]o dance as explicated by Raymond Sawyer & Ed Mock insisted that everything African, everything halfway colloquial, a grimace, a strut, an arched back over a yawn, waz mine. I moved what waz my unconscious knowledge of being in a colored woman’s body to my own everydayness. The depth of my past waz made tangible to me in Sawyer’s *Ananse*, a dance exploring the Diaspora to contemporary Senegalese music, pulling ancient trampled spirits out of present tense Afro-American Dance. (xi)

The year 1974 also marks the year Shange received her introduction to women’s theater. She spent “months with Halifu Osumare’s *The Spirit of Dance*, a troupe of five to six black women who depicted the history of Black dance from its origins in Western Africa thru to the popular dances seen on our streets” (xii). Inspired by these experiences, Shange created *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*. The choreopoem debuted in 1975 as a

portrayal of African women's experiences as rites of passage rooted in their shared African heritage.

Criticism of *for colored girls* falls within three categories. One group condemns the work as divisive within the African American community, another finds it a sorrowful depiction of African American women's lives, and a third group extols the voice Shange creates for African American women.¹⁰⁶ This last group comprises the majority of extant criticism on *for colored girls*. Even scholarship within this grouping falls between two sub-categories: one that celebrates Shange's experimentation with genre and another that lauds Shange's use of dance as a means of expression.¹⁰⁷ For example, Priscilla L. Walton writes, "Dance becomes Shange's

¹⁰⁶ Among scholars who find *for colored girls* divisive within the African American community, Erskine Peters and Elizabeth Brown (Brown-Guillory) criticize Shange for what they consider negative portrayals of African American men. Peters compares Shange's portrayal of African American men to D. W. Griffith's racially incendiary film, *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Brown attributes the negative portrayals of African American men to an overall lack of character development on Shange's behalf. (See: Peters. "Some Tragic Propensities of Ourselves: The Occasion of Ntozake Shange's 'For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the rainbow is Enuf.'" *The Journal of Ethnic Studies*. 6.1 (1978): 79-85. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Thomas Votteler and Laurie DiMauro. Vol. 74. Detroit: Gale Research, 1993. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 8 Dec. 2010.). See also Brown. "Ntozake Shange." *Afro-American Writers After 1955: Dramatists and Prose Writers*. Eds. Thadious M. Davis and Trudier Harris-Lopez. (*Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Vol. 38. Detroit: Gale Research, 1985) and Brown-Guillory. "Black Women Playwrights: Exorcising Myths." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Deborah A. Stanley. Vol. 96. Detroit: Gale Research, 1997.) In the second group of scholars, Sandra Richards notes that beneath a lot of the anguish she and other critics observe in *for colored girls* lies their willingness to dance – dance and music being metaphors for the courage to seek intimate connections with others. (Source: Richards. "Ntozake Shange: Overview." *Contemporary Dramatists*. Ed. K. A. Berney. 5th ed. London: St. James P, 1993. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 9 Dec. 2010.

<http://go.galegroup.com/psi/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420007289&v=2.1&u=uga&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>. Within the third group of scholars, Sandra Hollin Flowers credits Shange for rendering "an exquisite and very personal view of the politics of black womanhood and black male-female relationships." (Source: Flowers. "Colored Girls': Textbook for the Eighties." *Black American Literature Forum*. 15.2 (1981): 51-54. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Eds. Jean C. Stine and Bridget Broderick. Vol. 25. Detroit: Gale Research, 1983. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 9 Dec. 2010.

<http://go.galegroup.com/psi/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1100003202&v=2.1&u=uga&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.

¹⁰⁷ J. J. Wilson, Neal A. Lester, and Kay Vandergrift commend Shange for forging new territory not only for merging music, drama, and poetry into what she calls a "choreopoem," but also for African American women telling their own stories. (Source: Wilson. "Ntozake Shange: Overview." *Feminist Writers*. Ed. Pamela Kester-Shelton. Detroit: St. James P, 1996. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 9 Dec. 2010.

<http://go.galegroup.com/psi/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420007291&v=2.1&u=uga&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>. See Lester. "Ntozake Shange: Overview." *Reference Guide to American Literature*. Ed. Jim Kamp. 3rd ed. Detroit: St. James Press, 1994. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 9 Dec. 2010.

<http://go.galegroup.com/psi/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1420007288&v=2.1&u=uga&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>. See also Vandergrift. "Ntozake Shange: Overview." *Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers*. Ed. Laura Stanley Berger.

means of drawing attention to the natural movements of the female body” (“Ntozake Shange”). Shange renders the perspective of Africana women, in terms of their living and surviving in a society in which these very characteristics, gender and race, make them twice oppressed, and in terms of “a world where they are forced to care for themselves” (Brown-Guillory). What's more, Shange uses the Africana female body to express what is and has been unexpressed in historically Eurocentric and/or androcentric narratives and to demonstrate the significance of ritual and community in African American women's lives. Although some of Shange's critics do discuss African cultural motifs in *for colored girls*, I am the first scholar to my knowledge who examines the call-and-response aesthetic of West African female initiation rituals in Shange's coming-of-age narrative.

Through a highly nuanced experimentation with color, Shange introduces *for colored girls* as a narrative of and for Africana women. The first vignette commences on a stage set “in darkness. . . . as dim blue lights come up” (3). The lady in brown leads the group of six other black women onto the stage and announces “dark phrases of womanhood / of never havin been a girl” (3). The dark, dim stage, the appearance or introduction of the lady in brown, and her declaration of the “dark phrases” of womanhood work together to foreshadow a narrative unique to Africana women and one encoded in phrases that Africana women can share. Also, metaphorically, the “dark phrases” (3) signify the life transitions or rites of passage that the lady in brown will experience or observe. The lady in brown describes the vignettes that follow as “half-notes scattered without rhythm / no tune” (3), thus signaling distinctly what Zora Neale Hurston identified in her “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934) as an African aesthetic of

asymmetry.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, she offers the bluesy oxymoron of “distraught laughter” to establish that the myriad of experiences that will unfold are meant to describe the call-and-response aspect of “a black girl’s” distinctive coming-of-age tale.

Given the lady in brown’s introduction of the scenes that ensue, one might safely assume she is the young black girl, the object of her own adult reflection on becoming a woman. Dance represents the girl’s journey as she moves, literally and figuratively, through the various phases of her development. The “half-notes scattered” and “the melody-less-ness of her dance” represent each vignette, or note, in the play as a different phase of the young girl’s development. Moreover, each vignette begins with a sense of alienation and fragmentation in the black girl’s life. The literal image of the black body dancing on stage, and the multiple voices representing the varied narratives of seven nameless women, helps the myriad experiences of women of color to take shape and come to voice, respectively. Central to this convergence is the sense of community, which undergirds the emergent call-and-response aesthetic throughout the play. Significantly, the lady in brown calls for Africana women to give voice to their experiences, which she attests have been “closed in silence” (4). The colored girls’ responses represent the celebration, to paraphrase the biographer Jacqueline O’Connor, not merely of these experiences, but of the communal reinforcement that has nurtured their collective voices.¹⁰⁹ *In for colored girls*, the story that has been “closed in silence” is the collective history of Africana women, embodied by the lady in brown. Shange does not mean that stories of Africana women have not been told. Instead, as Mary Helen Washington posits, “what is most important about the black

¹⁰⁸In this essay, Hurston posits drama and dance, along with asymmetry, as other aspects of Negro culture. (in *Negro: An Anthology*, 1934.). See also Maude Southwell Walham’s *Signs and Symbols: African Images in African American Quilts* (New York: Studio Books, 1993. Print.) and Barbara Glass’s *African American Dance: An Illustrated History* (Jefferson, North Carolina; London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2007. Print.).

¹⁰⁹Shange biographer Jacqueline O’Connor suggests Shange’s intention to “tell a story that has not yet been heard, a story that has been ‘closed in silence,’ but must now be told and celebrated” (O’Connor. “Ntozake Shange.” in *Twentieth-Century American Dramatists: Third Series*. Ed. Christopher J. Wheatley. *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. 249 [2002]: 1-9. From *Literature Resource Center*.)

woman writer is her special unique vision of the black woman: . . . her aspirations, her conflicts, her relationships to men and her children, her creativity. . . .” (Washington 10).

Shange brings to her craft a perspective uniquely different from those of white writers, either male or female, and from those of black male writers. Historically, literature produced by white American writers has either vilified people of color and/or reflected a sense of paternalism. From the American literary canon, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), provides concrete examples of both instances. Although steeped in Stowe’s abolitionist sentiment, the story demonstrates African Americans’ total dependence on white benevolence for a successful integration in the larger American society. Additionally, the novel reinforces, among others, the Pickaninny stereotype in the character of Topsy, a “heathenish” young enslaved girl, whom the white Miss Ophelia must “train in the way she should go.”¹¹⁰

A similar power construct or binary historically emerges in literature produced by black men, who depict themselves either as the heroes of the weak, defenseless woman, or as the victims of her evil and trickery. For example, in Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940), Bigger Thomas is a black man who kills Mary Dalton, the daughter of the wealthy white family for whom he works, and Bessie, his black girlfriend. In both the novel and the theatrical version (1941), the black women are portrayed as weak. In the novel, Bigger murders Bessie; in the play, he kills her by accident. In either account, Bessie is untrustworthy in Bigger’s eyes. Essentially, Bigger kills Bessie because he cannot trust her not to remain silent about his accidental murder of the wealthy heiress Mary Dalton. Wright also portrays Vera Thomas, Bigger’s sister, as timid and afraid. She has a great deal of potential, but she lacks the

¹¹⁰(New York: The New American Library, 1966). In 1858, William Wells Brown, the first African American man to write a novel (*Clotel; or The President’s Daughter* [1853]) wrote the play *The Escape; or A Leap for Freedom*, in response to Stowe’s *Cabin*. This drama presents the character of Cato, who is the antithesis of Topsy in that she demonstrates a sense of agency when she tries to escape the system of slavery.

confidence to live up to it. Mrs. Thomas, Bigger's mother, similarly retreats to her religion because she has nowhere else to turn from her sense of fear and loneliness. A widow, she relies on Bigger to support her and her two other children.¹¹¹

Shange breaks these binaries not only by offering a black woman's story as experienced by a black woman, but also by telling the history, the backstory, of this woman's coming to voice. Just as each scene performed represents an episode of the Africana girl's development, each colored girl represents a vital part of her community of support. On the whole, the scenes in *for colored girls* represent the importance of ritual and community in African American culture, or, as P. Jane Splawn writes, Shange's attempt to show how these seven colored girls "recover a primal sense of unity and oneness through ritual" ("Change the Joke[r]"). The chorus of colored girls represents such a unified community of Africana women who have had similar experiences. So when they respond to the lady in brown's appeal for "somebody / anybody [to] sing a black girl's song / bring her out / to know herself / to know you" (Shange 4), they literally call attention to the fact that the instances distinguishing the lady in brown's life are, in fact, not unique; rather, they galvanize a community around shared experiences and create a figurative sense of oneness.

The first scene marking the young black girl's entry into life and community occurs following the lady in brown's opening monologue, just after she declares, "& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide / but moved to the ends of their own rainbows" (6). The chorus of colored girls then suggests the young girl's childhood innocence in a choral rendition of "mama's little baby likes shortnin, shortnin, / mama's little baby likes shortnin bread / mama's little baby likes shortnin, shortnin, / mama's little baby likes shortnin bread" (6). This scene reflects the earliest experiences of youth: children's games. The song that the colored girls sing

¹¹¹ (New York: Harper & Row Publishers.).

represents the experience of ritualized play, one of the earliest interactions between mother and child, which marks the child's initiation into community. Typically, this game features a mother – or at least someone significantly older than the young child – and the young child herself. Generally, the elder woman in the position of authority gently grasps the hands of the child and helps her move her arms up and down, or in and out, in unison with the song's rhythm. This game accentuates not only singing and clapping, but also holding hands and swinging arms together to the rhythmic beat. The movement that this game engenders also introduces the child to the importance of music and dance as forms of play as well as the significance of establishing a sense of unity and oneness within family and community.

Ashanti girls in Ghana engage in a similar experience by using dancelike body movements on the first day of their nubility rites, or ritual initiation into young womanhood. Similar to the repeated refrains in the children's game, nubility chants feature "a few refrains and choruses which are sung several times over" (Sarpong 25), and adult women within the community sing the chants to the initiate, as a mother would to her child. Furthermore, aside from the initiate, the woman who is officiating at the various rituals is the most important character in this process. Like the mother figure in the aforementioned game, this woman, generally an elder in the community (whether or not she has children of her own is irrelevant), "possesses a spiritual power (of which she is scarcely aware), by which she sacralizes the girls to the satisfaction of the ancestors" (37).

On the first day of the nubility rites, wearing a blanket that represents the border between childhood and adulthood, the initiate sits on a stool draped in white. This stool "may not touch the ground, but must stand on a mat" (22). The elder woman "first lowers and raises the girl three times upon the stool, taking care, each time, that her buttocks make contact with its

surface” (22). The initiate literally vacillates up and down, thus marking the end of her childhood and the beginning of her adulthood. Throughout this process, she remains separate from the rest of the community. The elder women of the community celebrate her and honor and protect her youth and innocence before she enters adulthood. This first scene between mother and child in *for colored girls* enacts a similar celebration.

In the very next vignette in *for colored girls*, entitled “little sally walker,” the young black girl similarly lets go of her mother and her childhood and begins her transition into puberty and young womanhood. A little older in this scene, the young black girl now joins the community of her girlfriends; together, they play another children’s game:

Little sally walker, sittin in a saucer
 rise, sally rise, wipe your weepin eyes
 an put your hands on your hips
 an let your backbone slip
 o, shake it to the east
 o, shake it to the west
 shake it to the one
 that you like the best (6)

Showing decidedly more independence than the baby learning to clap and make music in “mama’s little baby likes shortnin,” now the black girl has “risen” in maturity and is “movin from mama to what ever waz out there” (7). In more command of her body and its language, she can shake [her body] to the one / that [she likes] the best.

Scholars differ on the exact origin of little sally walker. They describe it as “a brief drama about the joys of release from shame.”¹¹² Yet one seemingly indisputable fact maintains: “Little Sally Walker” is a children’s game that encourages female empowerment. Defiantly, the chorus champions Sally Walker to rise, to move, to “sally forth” beyond such potential containment, restriction, and sorrow. As she grows and develops physically, her body sheds its childlike form for that of a woman. Standing akimbo, she accentuates the curvature of her hips. She shakes her hips from side to side, metaphorically shaking loose her childhood, as an animal sheds its skin. Shaking her hips “to the one she loves the best” signifies her entry into puberty. As the musicologist Kyra Gaunt notes, black girls engage in games like “little sally walker” as “positive and playful identification. . . . This [type of] game song exploits the powerful meanings of movement and display on the black female body.” (156).¹¹³

Shange elucidates black women’s sexuality as not merely physical, but deeply spiritual, too. For in Congo culture, standing akimbo also signifies spiritual readiness.¹¹⁴ Central to Shange’s emphasis on the spiritual component of black women’s sexuality are her stage directions, which call for all the colored girls to perform this “little sally walker” game. She also reinforces the importance of black women identifying a sense of communal support early in their spiritual development, and particularly during the often alienating pubescent years. Fittingly, Shange follows this scene with the vignette entitled “graduation nite,” in which the lady in

¹¹²For example, Bessie Jones and Bess Lomax Hawes suggest the game is of European origin. (Source: Jones and Bess Lomax Hawes. *Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs, and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1987. 107).

¹¹³(See Gaunt. “Translating Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop: The Musical Vernacular of Black Girls’ Play.” In *Language, Rhythm and Sound: Black Popular Cultures into the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Joseph K. Adjaye and Adrianne R. Andrews (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1997. 156. Print.).

¹¹⁴In *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds*, as Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet detail, “The stance with one hand on hip and the other gesturing above or before the body conveys spiritual authority” (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1981. 50)

yellow details the alienation she felt as “the only virgin in the crowd” (7) and the secret pleasure she found in her first sexual experience: “by daybreak / i just cdnt stop grinnin” (10).

In the next vignette, entitled “now i love somebody more than,” dance again marks a crucial moment in the colored girl’s transition into womanhood. She learns the power of dance to communicate beyond linguistic and ethnic barriers, and, as a result, she overcomes these barriers in order to reconcile the seemingly distant Latina aspect of her heritage with her Africana cultural roots, to become a “colored puerto rican.” The lady in blue reveals, “when i waz sixteen i ran off to the south Bronx / cuz i waz gonna meet up wit willie colon / & dance all the time” (11). She remembers running away from home, to do two things: to be with the Nuyorican trombonist and music icon Willie COLON and to dance in a variety of Central American and Caribbean styles, specifically, “mamba (cuba) bomba (puerto rican) merengue (santo domingo)” (11). The fact that the lady in blue wants to be with COLON, and to dance these respective Cuban, Puerto Rican, and Dominican dance forms, signifies her desire to integrate her Africana and Latina heritages. In response to the lady in yellow’s question, “do you speak spanish?” for example, the lady in blue answers, “ola’ / my papa thot he was puerto rican & we wda been / cept waz just regular niggahs wit hints of spanish / so off I made it to this 36 hour marathon dance” (11). At the dance, though, she does not understand any of the Spanish language there, and she seems to stand out “wit [her] colored new jersey self” (12). Dance, however, helps her overcome the racial barrier she faces as an Africana woman in a Latino environment and the language barrier she faces in this Latino environment, since she was reared in a predominantly English-speaking home.

Historically, race and language have been the most significant barriers to Latino and Africana people’s full integration into American society. For women, gender further complicates

these issues and makes them feel their alienation in triplicate. Despite these markers of difference, the lady in blue recalls, “if dancing waz proof of origin / i was jibarita herself that nite” (12). She describes being “ready to dance” and “twirlin hippin giving much quik feet / & bein a mute cute colored puerto rican” (12). By calling attention to her black dancing body, the lady in blue subverts the language and racial barriers that foster her feelings of alienation. Because of the universal language of dance, the lady in blue can establish a sense of community on the Latina dance floor.

Dancing helps the colored girl overcome language barriers and, as a result, (re)affirm her self-confidence. This feat is especially important because of her dual sense of marginalization: She is a woman and African. This function of dance echoes the function of dance among the Vai women, a group occupying northwest Liberia as well as Sierra Leone.¹¹⁵ Inhabitants of this region are grouped, by age and gender, into two formerly compulsory secret societies – Poro for men; Sande for women -- wherein they learn their culturally proscribed gender roles through music and dance (*Music and Dance of Africa*). Among the Vai Sande women, “highly skilled dance instructors called *kengai*” (Ichikawa 11, author’s emphasis) train adolescent girls to perform specially choreographed dances and dance dramas based on themes from Vai social and occupational life. In both instances, dance transcends boundaries to reinforce a sense of community and bolster self-confidence. Among the Vai Sande women, dance transcends age boundaries between elder women and adolescents and instills within both groups a sense of confidence that Sande youth will have acquired, a skillset that will make them productive members of their society. Dance instills a similar type of confidence among the lady in blue that

¹¹⁵ According to Anthony Seeger, Senior Editor of the book companion to *The JVC & Smithsonian/Folkways Video Anthology of Music and Dance of Africa*, “Approximately 8,000 Vai inhabit the southern province of Sierra Leone, where they are called *Gallinas Vai*, but the majority of Vai speakers live in a 3,300 square mile area north of the Lora River and south of the Mano River in southern Grand Cape Mount County, Liberia (9).

she can transcend the ethnic and linguistic boundaries that she encounters in the Latino dance hall.

The lady in red and the lady in orange, respectively, perform the next two scenes: “no assistance” and “i’m a poet who.” These two performances introduce the significance of poetry as catharsis. For example, in “no assistance,” the lady in red says she has left “forty poems 2 plants & 3 handmade notecards” (Shange 14) for her fictive love interest. These objects represent the creative energy she has exhausted in an attempt to nurture what she realizes is a one-sided relationship. Consequently, she has decided to leave the relationship and, symbolically, the plant, for her lover to water his “damn self” (14). Her alienation results from her love interest’s lack of response to her call, as signified by creativity and nurturing.

Similarly, in the vignette entitled “i’m a poet who,” the lady in orange identifies herself as a poet who does not “wanna write / in english or spanish” (14). Instead, she wants to “sing make you dance / like the bata [/] dance scream” (14, author’s spacing). She identifies herself as a poet who wishes to inspire others through song and dance, just as women do in female initiation rituals in parts of West Africa. In fact, the lady in orange compares the language she wishes to create to the bata drum, whose origin traces back to the Yoruba people in West Africa. In *Ancient Text Messages of the Yoru’ba’ Ba’ta’ Drum: Cracking the Code* (2010), Amanda Villepastour discusses the bata drum’s communication technology and the elaborate coded spoken language of bata drummers. She establishes links between the bata drummers’ speech encoding methods and universal linguistic properties, even unknown to the musicians themselves.¹¹⁶ In this scene, Shange uses the bata drum to establish the significance of poetry as a kind of visual dance within the African American community. Through poetry, she issues a call for Africana women to embrace their oral culture over the strictures of a

¹¹⁶ (Farnham, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2010.).

European written language. Only then, she suggests, can Africana women cultivate a community of shared cultural values.

Shange follows “i’m a poet who” with two vignettes depicting the alienation that results from physical trauma: “latent rapists” and “abortion cycle #1.” Performed by the ladies in blue, red, and purple, “latent rapists” details not only the horrific experience of rape, but also how those horrors are compounded when the victim is a woman of color and she knows her attacker. The fact that Shange depicts this scene through the fragmented stories of three colored girls exposes, first, the numerous incidents of rape and/or domestic abuse within the black community and, second, the fact that all too often, the victims remain nameless, like the ladies in blue, red, and purple who bring these experiences to life. Furthermore, this scene depicts the possibility for healing by giving voice to these shared experiences both in the literal sense of talking about them and, more significantly, by performing and dancing the unspeakable.

In her essay entitled “Battered Black Women: A Challenge for the Black Community,” Beth E. Richie writes,

There is already so much negative information about our families that a need to protect ourselves keeps us quiet. Yet, we must not allow our voices to be silenced. Instead, we must strengthen and speak the truths about our families; we must support each other; but we must hear the cries of our battered sisters and let them be heard by others! (399)

Richie’s words reflect the sentiment expressed in “latent rapists.” Collectively, the ladies in blue, red, and purple posit the significance of call and response to fostering a much needed sense of community for support and, ultimately, for healing. The lady in blue remains on-stage to perform “abortion cycle #1,” in which she alludes to the alienation and fragmentation that is unique to women of color who experience “criminal, amateur abortions” (Chisholm 395) as a

result of having too little knowledge about contraception and too few medical resources available to them. The lady in blue's solo performance reinforces the physical and emotional dangers that arise from not having a viable support system within the community.

The story of "Sechita," the African goddess who summons the ancestral queen mother Nefertiti, follows, in which the ladies in green and purple expand the concept of community. In this vignette, the lady in purple narrates, while the lady in green performs, "sechita/ Egyptian/ goddess of creativity/ 2nd millenium" (24). Together, they present a transition ritual that reveals dance and community as a source of female empowerment. Sandra Richards explains this concept in her overview of *Shange* and *for colored girls*:

Through sound, rhythm, and repetition, through what the Yoruba of West Africa term *ase*, or the power to make things happen (which resides in language), *Shange* strives to call into being that primordial spirit who presides over the perpetuation of life. Similarly, the performer who dances Sechita's narrative both retraces the ancestral history of female agony and partakes of divine potency. Her experience potentially approximates that of a Vodun devotee, who, in dancing and opening her body to trance, serves as a medium of the gods and thereby reconnects herself and the community to all history, past, present, and yet unlived. Through the dynamic of conjuring, as manipulated by speaker, dancer, and musician, Sechita is presented victorious, kicking past the coins thrown onto the makeshift stage to commune with the stars. ("Ntozake Shange")

To the performance of Sechita's story by the lady in purple and the lady in green in *for colored girls*, Richards offers an insightful comparison of the movement of an entranced Vodun devotee. In addition to Richard's insights, I also find traces of Ashanti girls' initiation rituals in this evocation of the African goddess Sechita. The lady in green represents the elder woman in the

Ashanti ritual. Through her spiritual power, she “serves as a medium of the gods” (“Ntozake Shange”) and, through her words, she “reconnects herself and the community to all history, past, present, and yet un-lived” (“Ntozake Shange”). The lady in purple as narrator and the lady in green as dancer work in tandem to show how the fictive Sechita embodies the power of the elder woman in Ashanti girls’ nubility rites. As the narrator, the lady in purple calls on the lady in green to perform the role of Sechita. As the dancer, the lady in green demonstrates the power of her sexuality by adorning her body with “splendid red garters,” “blk-diamond stockings darned wit yellow threds,” “an ol starched taffeta can-can,” and “waxed eyebrows” (24) to command the attention of her white male onlookers at the Mississippi carnival where she performs. Like the elder woman in Ashanti girls’ nubility rites, the lady in purple oversees the lady in green’s performance. Effectively, the lady in purple issues the call for the lady in green to discover the power of her own sexuality. Similar to the female initiate in the Ashanti nubility ritual, the lady in green performs the story of Sechita according to the lady in purple’s words.

The Sande initiation ceremony among the Vai women centers on a performance during which “the girls learn special choreographed dances and dance dramas. They also learn the special speech surrogate performed on the *sasaa* (rattle) to communicate various signals and commands” (*Music and Dance in Africa*). Together, the lady in purple and the lady in green produce a similar effect. Each time the lady in purple yells “Sechita,” she signals the lady in green’s performance of a special choreographed dance. Just as the Vai women view dance as a particular area of life in which women “are on an equal level with men” (*Music and Dance in Africa*), so too do the lady in purple, the lady in green, and, by extension, Sechita.

For example, the lady in purple describes Sechita as “tauntin in the brazen carnie / lights” (25), her legs slashing “furiously thru the cracker nite” and kicking “viciously thru the nite /

catchin stars between her toes” (25), and the lady in green performs accordingly, thus bringing Sechita to life and breaking through a history of southern white male supremacy. Although Shange’s description of the white men “aimin coins tween [Sechita’s] thighs,” reinforces the trope of black invisibility, on another hand, it demonstrates how black women have had to work within their positions as objects to subvert racism and patriarchy. In this instance, Sechita works as a carnival dancer to take money from her historical oppressors. Sechita recognizes herself as the object of the dominant white male gaze; yet, as the object of their gaze, she renders powerless the “redneck whoops” (24) surrounding her in “the cracker nite” (25). Shange’s use of the pejorative terms “redneck” and “cracker” signals her subversion of southern white male domination. This feat is especially important because this scene takes place in the southern town of Natchez, Mississippi, which was home of the historic Forks of the Road, the second largest slave market in the South.¹¹⁷ This triple-layered performance by the lady in purple and the lady in green in the role of Sechita/Nefertiti expresses the significance of community among black women, particularly in locales such as the Natchez carnival where their gendered objectification is compounded by racism.

Additionally, when Sechita makes “her face like nefertiti” (24-25), the fifteenth-century Egyptian queen of the Akhenaten dynasty, she enacts a ritual similar to dancers in the Boke and Boffa regions of the Guinea Coast in West Africa. A ritual dancer in these regions often wears a nimba mask, which is “associated with the rice production and conception cycle, and pertains to notions of fertility and abundance. Its meaning is deeply linked to the Mother-Earth conception” (Huet 25). The mask is a bust of a female figure, thus showing their belief in women’s direct connection to nature, specifically to the life-bearing “Mother-Earth.” This tie to nature underscores the importance of women in the community and also justifies the significance of

¹¹⁷See Natchez Pilgrimage Tours website: www.natchezpilgrimage.com/history.htm.

female initiation rituals. As bearers of life, women, indeed, occupy a sacred space, particularly in many African communities. Consequently, the occasion of a young girl reaching puberty and being able to reproduce warrants the kind of ceremonial celebration marking Ashanti girls, Vai women, and Shange's young black girl.

When Sechita makes "her face like nefertiti," she recalls simultaneously an Ashanti girl embarking upon her nubility rite, and the officiating elder woman attending to the young initiate. By virtue of their status as sacred women, both the elder woman and Queen Nefertiti serve the purpose of imparting wisdom and guidance to the adolescent girl embarking upon her womanhood. As an abstract representation of the young black girl, Sechita and her story symbolize the need for Africana women to be creative. Her story reminds Africana women that the ultimate value of their bodies lies in the fact that it is the one thing over which they have outright control and ownership. Furthermore, Sechita's story represents the need for Africana women to use their creative energies to survive in a society in which men treat them as objects.

Shange follows "sechita," a scene illuminating the importance of black women calling on the spirits of their ancestral goddesses to turn the tables on racism and sexism, with "toussaint," a scene elucidating the importance of black women also embracing the spirits of their heroic male forbears as a part of their ancestral community. In this, the only other scene performed by the lady in brown, she interjects her reflection of meeting "TOUSSAINT / [the] first blk man" (Shange 26), whom she would encounter both in history books, in the form of TOUSSAINT L'OUVERTURE, and as a friend, in the person of Toussaint Jones. The lady in brown equates her reading about Toussaint L'Ouverture with "the beginnin uv reality" (26), which suggests the importance she places on learning about her own heritage, as opposed to the fictional tales of "cajun katie / pippi longstockin / Christopher robin / eddie heyward & a pooh bear" (25-26),

which apparently had framed her youth. Similar to the lady in yellow's description of her first sexual encounter on "graduation nite" (7), the lady in brown's reading about the historical Toussaint L'Ouverture marks her graduation from her childhood innocence (as signified by the characters whom she encounters in the children's section of the library) to the inspiring reality of strong, resilient black men of her African heritage. Similar to the Vai women, who view dance as a particular area of life in which women are "on an equal level with men" (*Music and Dance in Africa*), Shange equates the black girl, as embodied in the resilient sechita/nefertiti, with those men like the young Toussaint Jones, who demonstrates his strength and resilience because he "dont take no stuff from no white folks" (30).

This is expressed when the lady in brown exits the stage, and the lady in red enters and narrates "one." Even within her relationships with men, the colored girl feels alienated. She reveals that her search for love among "tactful suitors / to experience her body & spirit" (33) is also a performance. After they leave, she becomes herself / ordinary / brown braided woman / with big legs & full lips / regular" (34). Similar to the lady in green, the lady in red describes an experience in which she performs for the pleasure of men, while masking her true desires, which are not merely to seek attention, but to find true love. The ladies in green and red thus demonstrate a type of "double inversion" in which they mask their real vulnerability within a patriarchal society. The Black feminist theorist bell hooks discusses the propensity for this type of masking among women:

[W]omen may feel the need to pretend that they are self-loving, to assert confidence and power to the outside world, and as a consequence they feel psychologically conflicted and disengaged from their true being. Shamed by the feeling that they can never let

anyone know who they really are, they may choose isolation and aloneness for fear of being unmasked. (60)

In this particular scene, the lady in red issues a metaphorical call for other black women to embrace their physical attributes as she does. Their responses in the affirmative foster a community of women who embrace their collective markers of racial and gender difference. The ladies in blue, yellow, purple, and orange reinforce similar images in their performances both of “i used to live in the world” and “pyramid.” Because of constantly feeling the need to negotiate their subjectivity against how the men in their lives see them and treat them, they no longer “live in the world.” Now, they live in Harlem, where their “universe is six blocks / a tunnel with a train / [they] can ride anywhere / remaining a stranger” (36). In these confines, they are constantly reminded of their own invisibility, by men who pursue them but never get to know them because they see them only as objects. The collective performance of these four colored girls suggests the importance of community in overcoming the sense of invisibility. Shange’s inverted syntax in the aforementioned passage reinforces the idea of Africana women’s objectification. By framing her physical features – brown braids, big legs, and full lips -- with the words “ordinary” and “regular” (34), Shange suggests that the colored girl does not see herself as being any different from any other woman; however, the physical attributes she lists between these aforementioned adjectives reinforce her objectification. The colored girl acknowledges her brown braids, big legs, and full lips, all of which historically have served as markers of difference and the very reason white women, as well as African American and white men, have historically viewed the Africana woman as inferior, ugly, and/or exotic, “a servant in the seraglio, a savage in the landscape.”¹¹⁸ Yet, this inverted syntax also indicates that, although

¹¹⁸ *The Black Female Body: A Photographic History*, eds. Deborah Willis and Carla Williams (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2002. 1. Print.).

others may see these features and view her as an outsider, during this phase of her development, the black girl has learned to love herself.

The four-part cycle of “no more love poems” marks the culmination of the black girl’s transition from childhood to adulthood. In each scene, the ladies in orange, purple, blue, and yellow, attest that they have learned perhaps the most important life lesson: to love oneself. In “no more love poems #1,” the lady in orange announces her soliloquy as, “a requiem for [herself] / cuz i have died in a real way” (43). At this pivotal moment in “the black girl’s song” (4), the lady in orange bids a figurative farewell to the part of herself that “had convinced [/ herself] colored girls had no right to sorrow / & lived & loved that way & kept sorrow on the curb” (43). Admittedly, she buries this part of herself because she “cdnt stand bein sorry & colored at the same time / it’s so redundant in the modern world” (43). In this first phase of the cycle, the colored girl realizes that as a result of trying not to be “someone callt a colored girl an evil woman a bitch or a nag” (42), someone who leaves “bitterness in somebody’s else’s cup” (42), she has “died in a real way” (43). By trying hard not to become the stereotype of the angry black woman, she has suffered an emotional death. Yet she also reaches the moment of maturity when she decides to be true to herself. Like the celebratory music comprising female initiation rituals among the Ashanti and the Vai Sande women, the colored girl’s requiem for herself effectively marks the demise of her self-loathing and the rise of her self-love.

Narrated by the lady in purple, “no more love poems #2” offers another verse of the requiem. She states, “i am really colored & really sad sometimes & you really hurt me” (44). This admission takes the colored girl one step further toward self-actualization. “i am ready to die like a lily in the desert,” she says, emphasizing her transition toward self-acceptance. She acknowledges that she has “poems / big thighs / lil tits / & so much love” (44). By calling

attention to both her poetry, as does the lady in orange in “i’m a poet who,” and her physical traits, as does the lady in red in “one,” the lady in purple reinforces the need for what poet Audre Lorde termed the “revolutionary demand” (38) for Africana women to celebrate and integrate both mind and body. She frees herself of the burden she calls dancing “wit ghosts” (Shange 44). Instead, she can proudly embrace being “a colored girl / [. . .] bein real / no longer symmetrical & impervious to pain” (44). As the colored girl learns to love herself, she takes a huge step in becoming a self-actualized woman.

The lady in yellow brings the black girl one step closer to self-actualization as she narrates “no more love poems #4.” In this apex of the love poems cycle, the lady in yellow reveals “bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma / i haven’t conquered yet” (45). Waxman posits, “The lady in yellow attempts ‘to resolve her metaphysical dilemma by declaring her commitment to love, by refusing to endure men’s abuse of this love, and by proclaiming the humanity of her soul’” (“Dancing”). She raises a valid point. Yet she fails to articulate directly how the lady in yellow’s proclamation is crucial to her development as an Africana woman, although this meaning is implicit in her analysis. When the lady in yellow says, “my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of soul & gender,” (45), she expresses her epiphany that she need not compromise her quest for spiritual, emotional, and sexual fulfillment simply because, as a woman of color, she comes from a history of being discounted in these very same areas. The colored girl who observes this vignette realizes that the journey toward achieving fulfillment in all three areas begins with learning to love herself.

After rendering the final verse of the requiem, the lady in yellow announces, “my love is too delicate to have thrown back in my face” (46). Immediately, according to Shange’s stage directions, “the lady in brown comes to life” (46) and joins the other colored girls in proclaiming

their love, in general, as too special to be taken for granted. Shange's stage directions indicate, "The lady in green then breaks into a dance, [and] the other ladies follow her lead and soon they are all dancing and chanting together" (47). In this sequence, the colored girls enter into a call-and-response pattern in which they render a choral refrain of each word describing their love – "music," "delicate," "beautiful," "sanctified," "magic," "saturday nite," and "complicated" (47-49). This dancing and chanting mirror the call-and-response pattern at the heart of the African American and African vernacular traditions.¹¹⁹ The lady in brown calls for the other colored girls to "sing a black girl's song" (4), and they do so via each "dark phrase" they perform. Together, both the lady in brown, as the one who calls for the colored girls to "sing a black girl's song," and the other colored girls who sing it, represent a call for other anonymous, invisible, and voiceless women of color to come to voice by joining the larger community of black women who have lived similar experiences in silence and solitude.

Following the lady in red's heart-wrenching narration of "a nite with beau willie brown," who threw his and his girlfriend crystal's children, kenya and kwame, to their death from a five-story window, she introduces the final scene of the choreopoem, "a layin on of hands." This scene establishes the final phase of the colored girl's initiation ritual. The lady in red reflects, "i waz missin somethin" (60), followed by the lady in purple's acknowledgement, "somethin so important" (60), and the lady in orange's submission, "somethin promised" (60). The "somethin [. . .] missin, [. . .], important, [. . .] and promised," which the ladies felt was, according to the lady in blue, "a layin on of hands" (60). The colored girls form the community of women who ultimately will perform the "layin on of hands," to help the lady in red heal from the sense of fragmentation she feels.

¹¹⁹See John F. Callahan's *In the African-American Grain: Call-and-Response in Twentieth-century Black Fiction* for an exploration of the impact of African-American oral storytelling techniques on contemporary African-American literature. (Urbana; Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2001.).

In this scene, each colored girl represents a different phase, or “phrase,” of the lady in brown’s development, and each one represents a kind of spiritual goddess coming in and reinforcing the “specially formed community which has grown from the brokenness of life” (Mitchell), with the lady in brown at the epicenter as its galvanizing agent. The very same representations characterize aspects of the Sande society among the Kpelle women in Liberia. As Ruth Stone describes, “Young adults emerge at the end of their educational session and demonstrate the dances they have learned as part of their preparation for adulthood. An essential aspect of the graduation exercise is a display of the dances that everyone has learned to perform” (13). Similarly, in this last scene, each “phase,” or “colored girl,” performs a component of the overall message: the “somethin missin” (Shange 60) was the communal “layin on of hands.” This group performance shows a far more matured perspective, in which the colored girl learns that real love comes not in the arms of any man, but through a community of women who nurture self-love. This community, according to Andrea Benton Rushing, represents “an alternative to the family based on shared coming-of-age rites, suffering, and peer relationships which, like a strong age-group or family, is impervious to outside attacks” (“For Colored Girls”). For the colored girls, this sense of community, or “layin on of hands” is both physical and spiritual. It represents the physical coming together of the colored girls in this final scene as they “enter into a closed tight circle” (Shange 64), literally laying hands on each other to “affirm women’s solidarity” (Rushing). A photograph featuring Theatre and Drama Professor Freda Scott Giles as the lady in red exemplifies this idea.¹²⁰ Taken at the first regional production of *for colored girls* at the Pittsburgh Public Theater, this photograph shows the colored girls standing with their arms outstretched toward the lady in red and forming a semi-circle around her. The semi-circle and the colored girls’ outstretched arms toward the lady in red represent the

¹²⁰See photograph, Image 4.2, in Appendix.

collective response to the lady in red's plea for help. In addition, the "layin on of hands" mirrors the complexity, the many layers and shades, of the black girl's story. She is not always the object of white or black male benevolence; neither is she always the victim of their malevolence. Her story contains as many layers and shades as the colors of the rainbow.

Spiritually, the "layin on of hands" also represents the summoning of foremothers and ancestral spirits, who form the larger part of the community welcoming the black girl into adulthood. Like the lady in green's performance of Sechita, who summons the spirit of Queen Nefertiti, these layers also represent the various shades, or nuances, of black womanhood. Furthermore, as each "colored girl" performs a different aspect of the lady in brown's coming-of-age tale, each one represents a different aspect of her persona. Collectively, they form the various layers of experience that lead to the revelation, "I found god in myself / & i loved her fiercely" (Shange 63). When the lady in red speaks these words, she renders a fitting sentiment to conclude the black girl's initiation into womanhood. As a result of her experiences, the colored girl recognizes her spirituality as inextricably linked to those Africana women who have come before her. Together, they form a larger community bound by their shared experiences as Africana women. By finding "god in [herself] and "[loving] her fiercely" the colored girl discovers value not only in herself, but also in her relationship with those Africana women, who also find solace in a community of shared experiences.

Contrary to popular opinion, the color of dark brown, not white, results when all the pigments of the rainbow spectrum are combined. Likewise, the colored girls' collective experiences are representative of Africana women's experiences over generations and geographies. As a result of their stories, the young girl emerges out of her "black," meaning unenlightened, phase into womanhood. As the sacred woman, or "earth mother," the lady in

brown represents the vast array of experiences of all Africana women. Shange thus gives the lady in brown the production's final words: "& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide / but are movin to the ends of their own rainbows" (64). The lady in brown metaphorically assumes her role as mother and nurturer. In this role, she issues the call for other Africana women to share their lives and to contribute to the collective healing of black women so that they no longer will feel the need to suffer in silence and shame. Buoyed by a nurturing community of shared African and female values, black women can begin to recover from the alienation and fragmentation that they have all too often borne in silence.

CHAPTER 6

CALLING ON THE SPIRITS: TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

One of the main influences on African American literature emerging since the Civil Rights Movement is that of African American Studies programs and their incorporation of scholarship reflecting the African American vernacular tradition. These programs introduced into the American literary canon works featuring three distinct characteristics: a reconsideration of African American history in order to understand African American cultural identity, a return to the African influence in African-American culture, and a reclamation of the extended African American family unit. Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) captures all three of these characteristics. The novel depicts a children's game reminiscent of the West African Ring Shout, which Sterling Stuckey describes in his book *Slave Culture* (1987) as a site of cultural memory and healing for the characters in the novel.

As its name suggests, the Ring Shout is a ritual in which participants move in a circular, counter-clockwise formation while chanting to their ancestral spirits and summoning their protection from European colonization, which threatens the survival of African American communities and folk culture.¹²¹ Similarly, Morrison presents a circular narrative in *Song of Solomon*,¹²² in which the historical accounts of two of the primary characters lead the third to

¹²¹See P. Sterling Stuckey's *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987). Print.). See also Lynne Fauley Emery's *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today*. (2nd Rev. Edition. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Book Co., 1988. Print.); James Haskins's *Black Dance in America: A History Through Its People* (New York: T. Y. Crowell, 1990. Print.); Art Rosenbaum's *Shout Because You're Free: The African American Ring Shout Tradition in Coastal Georgia* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1998. Print.); Marlon T. Riggs's *Ethnic Notions* (Berkeley, CA: Signifyin' Works Production Company. Distributed by California Newsreel); and Barbara S. Glass's *African American Dance: An Illustrated History* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2007. Print.)

¹²²For a discussion of the narrative techniques in the novels of Toni Morrison's novel, see Jennifer Lee Jordan Heinert's *Narrative Conventions and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (New York: Routledge, 2009). . Morrison's *A Mercy*. In *MELUS*. 36.2 [Summer 2011]. 147-164.)

discover their family history, which functions as an agent of healing for all of them. Morrison has demonstrated a penchant for incorporating multiple perspectives and encouraging communal discourse. In her latest novel, *A Mercy*, according to literary critic Valerie Babb, each character “adds a piece to a communal quilt, and the novel’s narrative structure privileges no one voice over another” (149). In this chapter, I provide the context in which to understand such fragmented characters in *Song of Solomon*, then I discuss the characters whose collective accounts reveal the history of an African American family’s survival of their African heritage in America.

I base my concept of cultural healing on Gaye Wilentz’s book, entitled *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-Ease* (2000), in which she “examines women from diverse ethnic backgrounds as cultural workers who aim, through their writings, to heal self and community from . . . socially constructed diseases” (3) such as self-loathing and self-hate. Wilentz considers self-loathing and self-hate as types of cultural “dis-ease,” since they result in ethnic minorities often viewing themselves as different, and also deviant from the dominant white culture. Wilentz writes, “Many ethnic women writers explore the curing of cultural self-loathing and collective self-hate within a storytelling ceremony” (3) based on non-Western traditions. Throughout the novel, she maintains, “the denigrated healing traditions of suppressed worldviews become the basis for repairing fractured communities and diseased cultures” (3). This premise resonates in Morrison’s novels, and specifically in *Song of Solomon*.

In her essay entitled “Memory, Creation, and Writing” (1984), Morrison acknowledges her heavy dependence on memory to “know the truth of [her] cultural sources” (386). The characters, themes, and motifs she erects represent her attempt to cull the often neglected or discredited history of African people in America. Arguably the best example of this attempt is in

her 1987 novel, *Beloved*, which presents a fictionalized account of Margaret Garner, an enslaved Kentucky woman who killed one of her children, an infant daughter, so she would not experience bondage. Morrison's fictional representation of Garner's tale forces Americans, in general, and African Americans, in particular, to face poignant aspects of American history. Morrison intimates that, especially in America, where history tends to minimize its darkest moments, people must fully embrace their history in order to understand their place in society. Through a pivotal scene involving a children's game that resembles the West African Ring Shout, Morrison conveys a similar sentiment toward memory, or (re)membering,¹²³ in *Song of Solomon*.

In *Shout Because You're Free: The African American Ring Shout Tradition in Coastal Georgia* (1998), the painter and folklorist Art Rosenbaum establishes the Ring Shout as "the oldest continuously practiced African-derived dance in the United States" (1). Although the Ring Shout in *Song of Solomon* is more representational than presentational, it emphasizes the importance Morrison places on African cultural memory. Dance Historian Barbara Glass offers this rationale for the Ring Shout's survival in America:

First, the dance was strongly African, and through its African ritual and communal characteristics it provided a rich nurturing experience for both enslaved and free blacks. Secondly, blacks maintained the Shout as a dynamic folk tradition, constantly adapting it to the demands and conditions of, first, slavery, and later, the life in Christianized African American communities. Third, it formed a repository of cultural and religious content that remembered the past of slavery and looked forward to the spiritual joys of the afterlife, thus reminding African Americans of their proud history and future. Fourth, the

¹²³See Ashraf H.A. Rusdy's essay, entitled "'Rememory': Primal Scenes and Constructions in Toni Morrison's Novels." In *Contemporary Literature*. 31.3 (Autumn, 1990). 300-323. U of Wisconsin P. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208536>.

Shout represented a variety of resilient African musical and dance traits that transformed themselves to reappear again and again in African American cultural arts . . . (32-33)

Coincidentally, Glass's references to the nurturing ritual and communal properties of the Ring Shout, its survival as a folk tradition – one that remembers the past – and its resilience in not only the African American community, but also, by extension, within the fabric of American culture, also convey Morrison's regard for cultural memory in her writing. Because of these very same characteristics, the Ring Shout becomes an appropriate motif to demonstrate the importance of cultural memory in healing the otherwise fragmented characters in *Song of Solomon*.

Morrison's novel essentially tells a story of reconciliation and healing through the tale of a black family – African tribal descendants who migrated from Virginia and now live in Pennsylvania – whose members suffer from the pain and powerlessness of feeling disconnected from each other and, therefore, from their cultural heritage. Within this story, however, a pivotal scene involving children playing a game becomes the moment of reconnection to heritage and culture for Milkman, whom many scholars consider the first male protagonist in Morrison's novels.¹²⁴ The game the children play closely resembles the Ring Shout: the children move in a circle while one boy twirls around within its center. By empowering this particular scene with such transformative effects for Milkman and, through him, other members of his family, Morrison shows the Ring Shout as an agent of cultural memory and healing.

Song of Solomon has enjoyed both popular and critical success, spending sixteen weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list and, in 1978, winning the National Book Critic's Award as

¹²⁴Yet, in "Male Consciousness: *Song of Solomon*," Jan Furman suggests that because the protagonist Milkman's consciousness is so closely affected by women, his is a decidedly female consciousness (Source: Furman. "Male Consciousness: *Song of Solomon*." *Modern Critical Interpretations: Song of Solomon*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999. 195-207.

well as the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award (Blue). Notwithstanding occasional negative critical reception, geared mainly toward Morrison's "handling" of male characters, most critics have found even this element in *Song of Solomon* worthy of praise (Buchan). In general, scholarship on *Song of Solomon* resides among four broad and overlapping categories: race, gender, culture, and more recently, discourse. For example, scholars like Michael Awkward and Nancy Chick examine the significance of *Song of Solomon* for black feminist criticism. Denise Heinze and Sandra Adell, as well as Elizabeth Evans, relate Morrison's respective reliance on history and memory, especially in *Song of Solomon*, to her respect for the human landscape, and for helping African Americans, in particular, make sense of their lives in the context of being American. In *New Essays on "Song of Solomon"* (1995), Valerie Smith introduces scholarship on the narrative construct within the novel. The common thread among the essays comprising this work is an exploration of how Morrison posits the African American vernacular tradition as a means of survival. For example, Joyce Irene Middleton examines the significance of orality as a precursor to literacy and its centrality to the African cultural arts of listening and remembrance. As well, Marilyn Sanders Mobley elucidates the interplay of call and response as a vital component of African American community building and identity formation.¹²⁵

¹²⁵Extant scholarship on Morrison's treatment of race, gender, culture, and discourse includes "Unruly and Let Loose: Myth, Ideology, and Gender in *Song of Solomon*," in which Michael Awkward writes, "*Song of Solomon* serves as a wonderfully appropriate site for . . . a discourse attuned to the intersections between Afrocentric and feminist ideologies." (Source: *Modern Critical Interpretations: Song of Solomon*. Ed. Harold Bloom. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999. 95-113). Also, in her overview of Morrison's work, Nancy Chick credits Morrison for revealing "feminist issues concerning black women, issues often forgotten in many feminist discussions" (Source: "Toni Morrison: Overview." *Feminist Writers*. Ed. Pamela Kester-Shelton. Detroit: St. James Press, 1996. From *Literature Resource Center*.). See also Heinze and Adell. "Toni Morrison." In *Nobel Prize Laureates in Literature, Part 3. Dictionary of Literary Biography Vol. 331*. Detroit: Gale, 2007. From *Literature Resource Center*; Evans. "Chapter 7: Pass It On." In *Toni Morrison*. Ed. Wilfred Samuels. *Twayne's United States Authors Series* 559. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990. From *The Twayne Authors Series*; and Middleton's essay, entitled "From Orality to Literacy: Oral Memory in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" in *New Essays on "Song of Solomon"*. Ed. Valerie Smith. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. of Cambridge Press, 1995. 19-39.

Though most times more implicit than explicit, most extant criticism on *Song of Solomon* nods to Morrison's use of African motifs. For instance, scholars such as David Buehrer and Jane Elizabeth Dougherty allude to the novel's flight motif, which represents the myth of the African slaves who had the literal ability to fly home to freedom in Africa, away from a life of slavery in America. Scholars such as Barbara Christian, Elizabeth Evans, and A. Leslie Harris discuss Morrison's intertextual reference to this myth, which, Christian explains, "is found wherever Africans were enslaved" and is "the foundation of this work" (60). Similarly, in his essay "Competing Discourses in *Song of Solomon*" (1977), Linden Peach asserts, "the [favored] ontology in [*Song of Solomon*] is distinctly African, embracing black folktales and African legends and giving priority to African values that underscore the importance Morrison places on memory." Perhaps more aptly stated, Morrison uses the concept of cultural memory to revisit, remember, and reconnect the African American characters about whom she writes to their African heritage; and, through this act of remembering, her characters are healed. Notwithstanding the abundant scholarship on Morrison's use of African motifs to engender cultural memory,¹²⁶ no one has explored, specifically, Morrison's depiction of the West African Ring Shout to generate cultural memory and healing. This chapter does just that.

Morrison introduces the Ring Shout in the form of a children's game, which Milkman witnesses during his visit to Shalimar, Virginia, from his home in Pennsylvania. The initial

¹²⁶In his essay entitled "American History X, Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and the psychological intersections of race, class, and place in contemporary America," David Buehrer compares the main characters in both works and their attempts to transcend the psychological effects of race and class in their communities (Source: *Journal of Evolutionary Psychology*. 25. 1-2 (Mar. 2004): p 18. From *Literature Resource Center*. As well, see Dougherty's "Overview of *Song of Solomon*" in *Novels for Students*. Ed. Marie rose Napierkowski and Deborah A. Stanley. Vol. 8. Detroit: Gale, 2000. From *Literature Resource Center*. See also Dougherty's "Overview of *Song of Solomon*" in *Novels for Students*. Ed. Marie rose Napierkowski and Deborah A. Stanley. Vol. 8. Detroit: Gale, 2000. From *Literature Resource Center*; Evans. "Liminality and the Search for Self in *Song of Solomon*." *Toni Morrison*. Ed. Wilfred D. Samuels. *Twayne's United States Authors Series* 559. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990. From *The Twayne Authors Series*; and Harris. "Myth as Structure in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski and Deborah A. Stanley. Vol. 8. Detroit: Gale, 2000. From *Literature Resource Center*.

reason for Milkman's journey to Shalimar is to retrieve the bag of gold that had belonged to a white man whom Milkman's aunt, Pilate, and his father, Macon Dead,¹²⁷ had killed in a cave there. Milkman has agreed to divide the riches three ways, keeping some for himself and sharing the other with his father and his friend, Guitar Bains. For these three long-suffering men, their riches promise to assuage the pain they each have felt through their own sense of disconnection from their families.

Macon Dead, Milkman's father, "hoarded his money" (63) and, in fact, has seemingly placed more value in making money than he does in nurturing familial bonds. He tells Milkman, "Money is freedom, . . . The only real freedom there is" (163); and, although every Christmas Macon gave Milkman and his sisters – Corinthians and Magdalena called Lena – "envelopes of varying amounts of money," he never thought "that just once they might like something he actually went into a department store and selected" (90). Ironically, the name Macon bequeaths to his family – "Dead" – indicates the quality of the relationships within their immediate family.

Macon Dead is also estranged from Pilate, his sister, ever since the two were children and had argued over the same bag of gold, which they had found on the man they killed in the cave back in Shalimar. Some fifty years later, even after Pilate moves to Pennsylvania where she knows her brother lives, the two remain estranged from each other. Macon knows that Pilate does not move north to Pennsylvania to make amends with him; therefore, upon arriving in Pennsylvania, she finds her brother "truculent, inhospitable, embarrassed, and unforgiving" (151), and she "would have moved on immediately except for her brother's wife, who was dying

¹²⁷ As in all Morrison's novels, naming is symbolic. Macon Dead is the name of Milkman's father, as well his grandfather, known as the first Macon Dead. Significantly, the name Macon Dead represents a miscommunication between Macon and an Army union officer. Morrison details that Macon did not understand the officer's question about his last name for Army records purposes. Macon responds "dead," thinking the officer is asking about his father's location, rather than his father's, or family's, name; accordingly, the officer records "Dead." That this name follows three generations of men symbolizes three generations disconnected from their heritage.

of lovelessness [in her marriage]” (151). Also, Pilate wants her granddaughter, Hagar, to have “family, people, a life very different from what she and [her daughter] Reba could offer” (151). In sum, Pilate wants Hagar never to be in need – of material resources and the psychological comforts of love and security¹²⁸ – as Pilate and Reba have been for most of their lives. When Milkman tells Macon about a green sack holding what Pilate calls her “inheritance” (163), Macon’s concerns turn solely to the gold he believes Pilate has kept from him, in this sack, in the years since their father died. Macon commands his son, “Get the gold” (172). Thereafter, Pilate’s presumed gold becomes Macon’s obsession, Guitar’s objective, and Milkman’s goal.

Ironically, although Pilate is the one who possesses the gold, she is seemingly the least affected by money. Morrison describes Pilate as one who always felt like she was “cut off so early from other people” (142). For Pilate, her sense of disconnection is as much physical as it is emotional. The fact that Pilate’s mother, Sing, dies while giving birth to Pilate is symbolized by her being born with no navel. Once people discover this physical deformity, they shun her. Feeling so cut off from friends and family alike, Pilate “gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners or hygiene” (149). Pained by the ills of loneliness, she even begins to give up on herself. As an adult, Pilate believes the ghost of her and Macon’s father, the first Macon Dead, continually visits her, saying, “Sing. Sing. You just can’t fly off and leave a body” (147). This command belies the singing and music for which Pilate is known.¹²⁹ Throughout the story, especially at seemingly tense moments,¹³⁰ Pilate bursts into song:

¹²⁸ On one hand, Pennsylvania represents the wealth of opportunities available in the north, as opposed to the Jim Crow South, which marked the metaphorical flight of many African Americans. On the other hand, even though Pilate and Macon are estranged, Macon’s family represents the potential of a familial connection, even though the relationship between Pilate and Macon is “Dead.”

¹²⁹ In her essay entitled “The Lyrical Dimensions of Spirituality: Music, Voice, and Language in the Novels of Toni Morrison,” Karla F. C. Holloway relates Pilate’s singing as the source of her woman-centered spirituality, and a symbol Morrison uses to reclaim African American cultural legacy and memory. (Source: *Embodied Voices: Representing Female Vocality in Western Culture*. Ed. Leslie C. Dunn and Nancy A. Jones. New York:

O Sugarman don't leave me here

Cotton balls to choke me

O Sugarman don't leave me here

Buckra's arms to yoke me. . . .

Sugarman done fly away

Sugarman done gone

Sugarman cut across the sky

Sugarman gone home. (49)

Pilate's singing holds Macon, Milkman, and Guitar in rapt attention. Morrison describes Milkman's and Guitar's reactions to hearing Pilate, her daughter Reba, and Reba's daughter, Hagar, sing: "Milkman could hardly breathe. . . . When he thought he was going to faint from the weight of what he was feeling, he risked a glance at his friend and saw the setting sun gilding Guitar's eyes, putting into shadow a slow smile of recognition" (49). Macon reacts in a similar fashion to hearing Pilate's singing:

Her powerful contralto, Reba's piercing soprano in counterpoint, and the soft voice of the girl, Hagar, . . . pulled him like a carpet tack under the influence of a magnet.

Surrendering to the sound, Macon moved closer. He wanted no conversation, no witness, only to listen and perhaps to see the three of them, the source of that music that made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico. . . .

Cambridge University Press, 1994. 197-211. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 194. Detroit: Gale, 2005. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 27 July 2011. Print.)

¹³⁰Pilate breaks into song, for example, at the death of Robert Smith, the Mutual Life Insurance Agent (9), and when Hagar, Pilate's granddaughter, reveals she has spent many days being "hungry" (48-49) for the love of a man.

Near the window, hidden by the dark, he felt the irritability of the day drain from him and relished the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight. (29)

Pilate's lyrics prove cathartic not only for her, Reba and Hagar, but also for Macon, Milkman, and Guitar, who equate money with security, but secretly find comfort in her singing.¹³¹

Significantly, Pilate's lyrics, not money, belie her wealth.

Macon, however, resists any outward attempts to maintain a relationship with either Pilate, or his wife, Ruth. Although the couple has reared three children together, Milkman's parents remained estranged from each other. Morrison describes how Macon Dead's "hatred of his wife glittered and sparkled in every word he spoke to her" (10) and Ruth "began her day stunned into stillness by her husband's contempt and ended them wholly animated by it" (11). In the Bible, Ruth is the loyal, loving daughter-in-law to her mother-in-law, Naomi,¹³² who has suffered the deaths of her father and two sons. The biblical Ruth has an immense capacity for love, which becomes the antithesis of the bitterness her mother-in-law experiences. In contrast, the love Ruth Dead longs for from Macon makes her bitter. Macon disliked Ruth's father, their town's first black doctor, because the doctor disliked Macon for his dark skin. Macon also disliked Ruth's father because he thought, even after he and Ruth married, that he could not compete with Ruth's affection for her father. This would explain why Macon has contented himself, at least superficially, with proving that he, too, can succeed in making his own money. The distance between Milkman's parents also explains why Ruth perpetuates their distance,

¹³¹ Vikki Visvis discusses the therapeutic effect of Pilate's singing, and she draws striking parallels between the emotionally redemptive spirituals to which Frederick Douglass refers in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845) and "The Sorrow Songs" about which W.E.B. Du Bois writes, in the chapter of the same name, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). (Source: Visvis. "Alternatives to the 'Talking Cure': Black Music as Traumatic Testimony in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." *African American Review* 42.2 (2008): 255+. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 27 July 2011.)

¹³² In the book of Ruth, Naomi says to the Moabites, "Don't call me Naomi [meaning "pleasant"] . . . Call me Mara [meaning "bitter"], because the Almighty has made my life very bitter." (Ruth 1:20. *The Holy Bible*. New International Version).

finding secret pleasure in often sleeping on her father's grave and in nursing Milkman – hence, his nickname. These actions, on Ruth's behalf, perpetuate Macon's disdain toward Ruth and also explain the distance Milkman feels for his father.

Born with one leg shorter than the other, Milkman also suffers from the mental and emotional disability invoked by the poisoned relationship between his parents and its permeation into his relationship with each of them. Milkman wants to use the riches he thinks he will find in Pilate's bag to leave home and live independently of these people, from whom he always has felt a sense of disconnection. He regards his family as “[s]trange motherfuckers” (76), and “He wonder[s] if there [is] anyone in the world who like[s] him” (79). He reflects, “He had never loved his mother, . . . [and] everything he did at home was met with . . . indifference and criticism from his father” (79). It matters not to Milkman that his father wants him to stay and work “right alongside” him (51, 234), not because Macon loves Milkman but because that's what Milkman's father had done with the first Macon Dead. Feeling estranged from his family, Milkman comes to find at least a sense of connection with his closest friend, Guitar Bains, the only person whose opinion matters to Milkman.

Lately, though, even Milkman and Guitar have grown distant from each other. Milkman reflects:

Something was happening to Guitar, had already happened to him. He was constantly chafing Milkman about how he lived, and that conversation was just one more example of how he'd changed. No more could Milkman run up the stairs to his room to drag him off to a party or a bar. And he didn't want to talk about girls or getting high. Sports were about the only things he was still enthusiastic about, and music. Other than that, he was all gloom and golden eyes. And politics. (106)

Because he is five or six years older than Milkman,¹³³ Guitar is both the big brother Milkman never had and the father figure for which he longs. Morrison describes the happiness Milkman felt with Guitar: “Milkman was five feet seven then but it was the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy. He was with his friend, an older boy – wise and kind and fearless” (47). These attributes endear Milkman to Guitar, perhaps as markers of difference from Macon Dead, who appears wise only in terms of money, and who provokes fear, rather than kindness, among his tenants as well as his family. Ironically, the wisdom, kindness, and fearlessness that Guitar exudes emanate from a maturity he has developed from a paternal loss similar to that which Macon experiences.

Pained by the feeling of disconnection from a family or heritage of his own, Guitar joins a vigilante group, which he calls Seven Days. “The Days” (161), the name by which Guitar refers to this organization, is a secret society comprising seven men: “Always seven and only seven” (155) -- one for each day of the week. Guitar explains, “If one of them dies or leaves or is no longer effective, another is chosen” (155). The purpose of this organization is to avenge the deaths of any black people at the hands of white people. Guitar reveals to Milkman:

[W]hen a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by *their* law and *their* courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can. If the Negro was hanged, they hang; if a Negro was burnt, they burn; raped and murdered, they rape and murder. If they can. If they can’t do it precisely in the same manner, they do it any way they can, but they do it. (154-55, author’s emphasis)

¹³³ Morrison introduces Guitar as “a cat-eyed boy about five or six years old” (7) when, in 1931, he witnesses North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Agent Robert Smith leap to his death from the top of Mercy Hospital in an attempt to fly. Milkman is born the next day.

Notably, “The Days” avenge these deaths based on the day of the week the killing occurs.

Guitar says, “If the Negro was killed on a Wednesday, the Wednesday man takes it; if he was killed on Monday, the Monday man takes that one. And we just notify one another when it’s completed, not how or who” (158).

The fact that Guitar reveals himself as “the Sunday man” (161) is ironic on two fronts. On one hand, Sunday is the day Christians consider a holy day, one dedicated not to work, but to worshipping God; yet, for Guitar, Sunday is his day to work – indeed, to kill -- for “The Days.” So, while most people observe Sunday as a day of spiritual reverence for God, for Guitar, Sunday is the day on which he essentially plays God by enacting his own vigilante justice. Symbolically, the Seven Days represents an allusion to the creation story in the Christian Bible. Similar to the biblical story of God creating the world in seven days, the Seven Days organization seeks to create a world free of white people. Ironically, the biblical story represents creating a world by generating new life, while the Seven Days seeks to create a new world by taking the lives of all white people, because Guitar believes “every one of them is a potential nigger-killer, if not an actual one” (155).

Guitar plans to use the riches, which he seeks to gain from Milkman, to aid the cause of the Seven Days. He rationalizes, “What I’m doing ain’t about hating white people. It’s about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is about love” (159). Perhaps this type of avenging love to which Guitar dedicates his life stems from the deeply-rooted sense of loss he has experienced. Guitar’s father dies, and his mother abandons him and his siblings, leaving them in the care of their grandmother, who struggles to keep a roof over their heads. Guitar blames his loss on white people, exemplified by his father’s seemingly nonchalant boss, who brings him and his siblings divinity candy to compensate for their father’s death; on his mother’s consequential

abandonment of him and his siblings, or even on Macon and Milkman's not being "serious" (104) about black people. Guitar accuses Milkman, "You got your high-tone friends and your picnics on Honore' Island" (103). His reference to Milkman's "high-tone friends" represents a history of intra-racial prejudice among African Americans. During slavery, lighter-skinned African Americans often performed seemingly less demanding tasks in the slave master's house, as opposed to darker-skinned slaves, who executed more physically demanding tasks in the field. Guitar cites Milkman and his family's frequent picnics on prestigious Honore' Island as examples of their not being serious about black people, because he views these excursions as signs of the privilege the family enjoys as a result of Macon Dead's ruthless business tactics as a tyrannical landlord to his black tenants. Guitar believes the Dead family's concern with its status, rather than with helping the black people within their own segregated community,¹³⁴ causes the family's disconnection from the black community, and, therefore, more closely attunes the Dead family to white people. Fueled by anger based both on his own culture's history of fragmentation¹³⁵ and his sense of disconnection from any obvious family, Guitar seeks to support the Seven Days, helping to assuage his pain and loss.

So, as far as Guitar and Macon are concerned, Milkman becomes the conveyor of the gold, which each seeks to aid his own agenda: Macon's increased wealth and Guitar's support of "The Days." Milkman, however, reveals his own motive not only for obtaining the gold, but also for making the journey altogether. He wants to start "living [his] own life" (221-222). He confides to Guitar, "I don't want to be my old man's office boy no more. And as long as I'm in this place I will be. Unless I have my own money. I have to get out of that house and I don't

¹³⁴Macon tells Milkman that Ruth and her father condescendingly called his work as a property owner and landlord "[b]uying shacks in shacktown" (71).

¹³⁵ Both the fragmentation and disconnection directly reflect the history of black families being torn apart by white slave owners, who forcibly removed would-be slaves from their homes in Africa, commanded them aboard slave ships, transported them to America, and bound them into slavery.

want to owe anybody when I go” (222). Milkman’s statement to Guitar reveals the irony of the former’s relationship with his father. On one hand, he longs to depart his father’s company – both the business and the familial bond. On the other hand, like Macon, Milkman equates money with freedom. Milkman, however, plans to under-cut his father. Despite Macon’s promise to give him half of the gold, Milkman promises to give Guitar one-third of it.

The search for the gold begins the reconnection that fosters the healing for him and the other characters in the novel. First, Milkman travels 240 miles northeast to Danville, Virginia, looking for a woman named Circe, who had taken care of Macon and Pilate after their father was killed. In Danville, Milkman meets Rev. Cooper, who represents the spiritual father who guides him along his journey toward healing. Milkman discovers that Rev. Cooper knows both Macon Dead – Milkman’s father and grandfather. Rev. Cooper tells Milkman, “Your daddy was four or five years older than me, and [his family] didn’t get to town much, but everybody round here remembers the old man. Old Macon Dead, your granddad. My daddy and him was good friends” (229). In fact, Rev. Cooper’s father, a locksmith, made the earring Pilate wears, the “little metal box with a piece of paper bag folded up in it” (231). The earring was a gift from Circe. Rev. Cooper not only knows Circe, but he also offers to drive Milkman “about fifteen miles out” (233) from his house to the farm where Macon and Pilate had lived with Circe.

As he waits for Rev. Cooper’s car to be repaired, Milkman enjoys being a guest in his home. He especially delights in the “long visits from every old man in the town who remembered his father or his grandfather, and some who’d only heard” (234). These visits proved conciliatory for Milkman. He learned from these men that Macon, Milkman’s father, “loved his father; had an intimate relationship with him; that his father loved him, trusted him, and found him worthy of working ‘right alongside’ him” (234). This revelation, along with the

men's fond memories of his grandfather, "whose death, it seemed to [Milkman] was the beginning of their own dying" (235), sparks a new interest in Milkman's family heritage. He internalizes:

Macon Dead was the farmer they wanted to be, the clever irrigator, the peach-tree grower, the hog slaughterer, the wild-turkey roaster, the man who could plow forty in no time flat and sang like an angel while he did it. He had come out of nowhere, as ignorant as a hammer and broke as a convict, with nothing but free papers, a Bible, and a pretty black-haired wife, and in one year he'd leased ten acres, the next ten more. Sixteen years later he had one of the best farms in Montour County. A farm that colored their lives like a paintbrush and spoke to them like a sermon. (235)

Despite the surname, Dead, that Macon Dead has bequeathed to his family, Milkman learns that his grandfather brought life, literally and figuratively, to the people of Danville. Literally, the first Macon Dead brought life to Danville in the form of vegetation and livestock. Figuratively, Macon Dead's legacy inspired the people of Danville to "[g]rab this land! Take it, hold it, . . . make it . . . shake it, squeeze it, turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, kiss it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plow it, seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on. . . . Pass it on" (235). Milkman learns not only of his grandfather's entrepreneurial spirit, but also that, besides the name Dead, he bequeathed this spirit of entrepreneurship to his son, Milkman's father.

Significantly, Rev. Cooper represents Milkman's North Star. He lives in Danville, which is 240 miles northeast of Milkman's home in Pittsburgh. Also, the fond memories and praise Rev. Cooper and "every old man in the town" (243) shared of Milkman's father and grandfather made Milkman "[glitter] in the light of their adoration and [grow] fierce with pride" (235). Rev.

Cooper and the townsmen reignite his interest in his family. By welcoming Milkman as a guest in his home, Rev. Cooper becomes a father figure to Milkman. Finally, as a pastor leads his congregation, Rev. Cooper leads Milkman to Circe, who will reacquaint him with another aspect of his family heritage.

Circe provides the information that further strengthens Milkman's connection with his family and the consequential healing that ensues. Milkman learns that Circe is the nurse who birthed his grandmother, whom Circe reveals was of "[M]ixed" heritage -- "Indian mostly" (243), and that his grandmother's name was Sing. Furthermore, Circe explains to Milkman that his grandparents "met on a wagon going North. . . . It was a wagonful of ex-slaves" (243), but that Sing "always bragged how she [nor her people] was never a slave" (243). Milkman's grandfather, however, was a slave, whose real name, Circe reveals, was Jake. Circe corroborates the story of the drunken soldier who erroneously recorded his grandfather's name as "Dead." She informs Milkman that Sing made his grandfather keep the name, perhaps indicative of Sing's desire for her husband to leave behind his slave past as they traveled north, Circe illuminates, from Virginia: "Charlemagne or something like that" (244). This information that Circe provides underscores her significance to Milkman's journey and healing.

Her presence in Milkman's life is symbolic on many fronts. In *Transformations of Circe: The History of an Enchantress* (1994), Judith Yarnall describes this mythological figure as the "female figure who possesses the ability to *transform*, to give shape to others or to take it away. She offers both debasement and deliverance, and new life in the flesh" (6-7, author's emphasis). Yarnall references the varying depictions of the Circe throughout literary history, including her earliest appearance in Homer's *Odyssey* (1708), where she "entertained Odysseus . . . in her sty full of sailors turned pigs" (1); her brief emergence in Virgil's *Aeneid* (19 B.C.E.), in which she

rules “a promontory where the air vibrates with the howls of chained and enraged beasts” (1); her presence in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) as Bella Cohen, a business woman who presides over a house as exotic as she is (1, 6); and her emanation in works by other women writers, such as Eudora Welty and Margaret Atwood, where “she is a strong-voiced, clear-eyed, solitary figure who speaks out knowingly about her powers and their limits” (1). Morrison conflates all of these images in *Song of Solomon*. Similar to the character in the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*, Morrison’s Circe lives in a house that had once belonged to the family responsible for his grandfather’s death, the Butlers. She lives there among dogs, so many in number that “a hairy animal smell, ripe, rife, suffocating” greeted Milkman before he could approach the door completely. Like the Circe of *Ulysses*, Morrison’s Circe entices Milkman at his first sight of her: “[T]here was no way for him to resist climbing up toward her outstretched hands, her fingers spread wide for him, her mouth gaping open for him, her eyes devouring him” (Morrison 239).

Morrison, however, more closely aligns her Circe with the feminist-oriented portrayal of the figure in the works of women writers like Welty and Atwood. For example, from a face that Milkman internalizes as “so old it could not be alive” comes Circe’s “strong, mellifluous voice of a twenty-year-old girl” (240). From this voice comes the very poignant, personal account that advances Milkman’s transformation and healing. Finally, similar to the image of the circle, and as the purveyor of personal knowledge of Milkman’s family history, Circe represents the African concept of cyclical time. By taking him on a figurative journey back in time, Circe becomes the guardian of “this entrance into [Milkman’s] past” (Harris). In fact, Circe’s leading of Milkman on a journey into cyclical time proves pivotal, literally, to Milkman’s journey. He retraces his steps to Danville, boards the bus, and travels south, in search of Charlemagne, Virginia, where he discovers the Ring Shout.

Finding no town named Charlemagne, Milkman inquires “at an AAA office, and after a while they discovered it and its correct name: Shalimar” (259). He purchases a car; soon after, the fan belt breaks, and Milkman finds himself stalled “right in front of Solomon’s General Store, which turn[s] out to be the heart and soul of Shalimar, Virginia” (260), which the store owner, Mr. Solomon, pronounced “*Shalleemone*” (261 author’s emphasis). While standing at the store, Milkman notices a group of children behind him; they “were singing a kind of ring-around-the-rosy or Little Sally Walker game. He witnesses eight or nine children standing in a circle, a boy in the middle, “his arms outstretched, [turning] around like an airplane” while the other children sing:

Jay the only son of Solomon

Come booby yalle, come booba tambee

Whirl about and touch the sun

Come booba yalle, come booba tambee . . . (264)

At first sight of the children dancing in circle formation and the boy twirling around with his arms outstretched like an airplane, Milkman dismisses their actions as meaningless child’s play.

After visiting with some of the residents of Shalimar, Milkman learns more about his family members and their significance within the town. He discovers, “[e]verybody in this town is named Solomon” (302), including the store owner, Mr. Solomon -- “Luther Solomon (no relation)” (302) -- whom Milkman meets in Solomon’s Store and with whom he goes hunting, and Solomon’s Leap, a local landmark named for the legendary African who, according to the lore, flew from this landing back home to his family. Vernell, the lady who prepares breakfast for Milkman and his new friends the morning after their hunt, reveals that she remembers Sing as “the name of a girl [her] gran used to play with” (283), and who her grandmother described as

“light-skinned, with straight black hair” (284). Vernell confirms what Circe had already suggested: Sing was “Indian. One of old Heddy’s children. Heddy was all right, but she didn’t like her girl playin with coloreds. She was a Byrd. . . . Belonged to the Byrd family over by the ridge. Near Solomon’s Leap. . . . One of Susan Byrd’s people” (284). Learning that Susan Byrd still lives in Shalimar, Milkman visits her, too, and discovers that his grandmother, Sing, was Susan Byrd’s aunt. Moreover, Susan Byrd confirms that Heddy, to whom Vernell had alluded, was Sing’s mother.

Returning to Solomon’s Store, Milkman, again, notices the children playing and singing in a circle what, previously, he had dismissed as some “meaningless rhyme” (264). This time, however, “he was surprised to hear them begin another song at this point, one he had heard off and on all his life. That old blues song Pilate sang all the time: ‘O Sugarman don’t leave me here,’ except the children sang, ‘Solomon don’t leave me here’” (300). These words prove to be the “lyrics of salvation” for Milkman and the other characters in the story (Holloway). These lyrics help to transform the once fragmented Milkman by revealing his celebrated family heritage.

Hearing the words again, Milkman recalls the words the children sing not as nonsense, but as a narrative of his family’s history. They sing:

Jake the only son of Solomon

Come booba yalle, come booba tambee

Whirled about and touched the sun

Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Left that baby in a white man’s house

Come booba yalle, come booba tambee

Heddy took him to a red man's house

Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Black lady fell down on the ground

Come booba yalle, come booba tambe

Threw her body all around

Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Solomon and Ryna Belali Shalut

Yaruba Medina Muhammett too.

Nestor Kalina Saraka cake.

Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!

O Solomon don't leave me here

Cotton balls to choke me

O Solomon don't leave me here

Buckra's arms to yoke me

Solomon don fly, Solomon done gone

Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home. (303)

Paying closer attention, Milkman ponders, “Jay the only son of Solomon? Was that *Jake* the only son of Solomon? Jake. . . . That was one of the people he was looking for. A man named Jake who lived in Shalimar, as did his wife, Sing” (302 author’s emphasis). He listens again. This time, the names of Solomon, Ryna, and Heddy also strike him as direct references to his family members, about whom he has just learned, and their legacy in the town of Shalimar. Hearing and seeing the children sing and play this game, Milkman notices, “He was grinning. His eyes were shining. He was as eager and happy as he had ever been in his life” (304). This exuberance comes as a result of his learning about his family heritage. This lesson, on behalf of the children’s circle game, marks the beginning of Milkman’s healing.

Also significant is the circular formation of the children’s game. This formation is similar to the formation of the ring dances in West African culture, which American slaves kept alive through their worship services. According to James Haskins’s book, *Black Dance in America: A History Through Its People*, “[m]any of the [holiday] dances were ring dances, in which the slaves danced in a circle, always counterclockwise, and without lifting their feet from the ground” (6). The group moves counterclockwise in a circle, representing their union with each other as well as with their ancestors, on whom they call while moving together in the circle. The circle represents the cyclical time in which the slaves are able to bring the past into the present, thereby looking back and communing with their ancestors while still moving forward.

Perhaps the Ring Shout also symbolizes the sacred connection that African slaves felt to their homeland or to the life-giving force that is the earth, since after visiting the people in Shalimar and learning more about his family heritage, Milkman feels “connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared” (293). He remembers, “Back home he

had never felt . . . as though he belonged to anyplace or anybody” (293). Among the people of Shalimar, however, he experiences a transformation that is both physical and spiritual:

. . . Milkman found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there – on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not limp. (281)

The fact that Milkman feels “exhilarated” marks the beginning of his healing once he is reconnected with his family history. Once wanting to flee the family from which he felt disconnected, Milkman now feels as if he belongs to the earth upon which he walks. As with the African connection that slaves generated on American soil, the land, in Shalimar, represents Milkman’s family, his roots. Milkman’s internalizing his legs as “tree trunks” echoes this idea. The children’s ring dance, in this respect, connects Milkman to his ancestors.

Milkman relates to Susan Byrd the “children’s game they play around here” in which they sing, “‘Jake the *only* son of Solomon.’ *Only*” (323, author’s emphasis). Susan Byrd reveals:

Well, they’re wrong. He wasn’t the only son. There were twenty others. But he was the only one Solomon tried to take with him. Maybe that’s what it means. He lifted him up, but dropped him near the porch of the big house. That’s where Heddy found him. She used to come over there and help with the soapmaking and the candlemaking. She wasn’t a slave, but she worked over at the big house certain times of year. She was melting tallow when she looked up and saw this man holding a baby and flying toward the ridge. He brushed too close to a tree and the baby slipped out of his arms and fell through the branches to the ground. He was unconscious, but the trees saved him from dying. Heddy

ran over and picked him up. She didn't have any male children, like I said, just a little bitty girl, and this one just dropped out of the sky almost in her lap. She never named him anything different; she was afraid to do that. She found out the baby was Ryna's, but Ryna was out of her mind. (323-24)

Milkman thanks Susan Byrd and leaves her house enthusiastic about having learned not only about his family heritage, but also of their significance to the lore of Shalimar, Virginia.

For Milkman, though, the children's game he witnesses in Shalimar becomes the metaphor for his healing. He learns that for Solomon, his great-grandfather, slavery in America was "the shit" (179) that weighed him down and that he gave up so that he could fly, literally and figuratively, back to freedom in Africa. Similarly, Guitar tells Milkman, "Guitar is *my* name. Bains is the slave master's name. And I'm all of that. Slave names don't bother me; but slave status does" (160, author's emphasis). These comments on Guitar's behalf are ironic in two respects. Guitar's first name denotes a musical instrument, which usually would also connote harmony. His last name, however -- Bains, as in "bane" -- means to destroy. Guitar Bains is a killing instrument, both literally, by virtue of his membership in "The Days," and figuratively, by virtue of what his first and last name represent. Effectively, Guitar is enslaved by the money Milkman promises him to aid the murderous vigilante Seven Days organization. Milkman, on the other hand, finds freedom in learning that his great grandfather flew back to freedom in Africa, rather than live in slavery in America. His great grandfather's freedom is now his freedom.

Milkman's singing the lyrics of the children's game signifies not only his embracing this aspect of his family history, but also his ability to heal another significant woman in his life: his Aunt Pilate. Having learned the truth behind these lyrics that both the children in Shalimar and

his aunt sang, Milkman is able to impart wisdom and healing to Pilate. The fact that Pilate's mother, Sing, dies in childbirth resonates in Circe's description of how Pilate "[b]orned herself" (244). The absence of Pilate's navel symbolizes this disconnection, too. After learning about their family history, however, Milkman is able to heal Pilate of these feelings and images that have plagued her.

In fact, Milkman warms to the thought of returning home to his family. He thinks, "Hating his parents, his sisters, seemed silly now" (300). Now, Milkman realizes the importance of his family not only within this town, where everything is named for Solomon, but also for his own healing. On his return home to Pennsylvania, Milkman feels renewed. He recalls entering his family house, "with almost none of the things he'd taken with him" (334). Effectively, Milkman has shed the burdensome baggage that he had carried with him for so long. The gold he once sought no longer matters to Milkman. The children's game, in this sense, has been an agent of healing for him. Also, like the boy twirling in the center of the children's game, Milkman can now point to this history to heal Pilate and Macon Dead, too.

To Pilate, Milkman explains that her father's ghost's words, "You can't fly on off and leave a body" had not been his admonishment of her and Macon – Milkman's father and her brother – for killing the white man and leaving his corpse in the cave. Instead, what Milkman has learned and now relays to Pilate is that the first Macon Dead was saying these words to his father, Solomon, the flying African who had rather fly back to his freedom in Africa than remain in bondage in America. Hoping to continue healing Pilate's wounds, Milkman shares with Pilate that her mother's name was Sing, and when the ghost of the first Macon Dead shouted at Pilate, "Sing! Sing!" he was really calling for her mother and not begging for her actually to sing. Milkman's sharing of the narrative heals Pilate too. Not understanding this story has made her

feel as if her family has abandoned her. Feeling like a pariah, Pilate resorted to the one thing that seemed to bring her joy and comfort, singing, which, she believed brought her closer to her father because she thought she was carrying out his wishes. To help his Aunt Pilate heal from her sense of disconnection from her family, Milkman convinces her to return to Shalimar to give Macon Dead a proper burial. There, “Pilate blended into the population like a stick of butter in a churn” (335). Prior to Milkman’s sharing what he learned in the children’s dance narrative, Pilate has never blended in anywhere.

Reconnecting with his father, Milkman shares how his transformative visit to Shalimar was crystallized in the children’s dance. Macon Dead “wasn’t a bit interested in the flying part, but he liked the story and the fact that places were named for his people” (334). True to form, Macon Dead is more impressed with the idea of his family’s importance in the town than in the idea of his great grandfather, Solomon, flying away from his bondage and towards his ancestral family and home. Moreover, although “[no] reconciliation took place between Pilate and Macon . . . and relations between Ruth and Macon were the same” (335), Macon Dead is healed in the sense that he finds comfort in learning that his family name is not “dead;” rather, it lives in distinction amid the lore in Shalimar, Virginia.

Because Milkman has imparted to his father the knowledge of their family legacy, Macon Dead can overcome his need to compete with his father-in-law, “The Doctor,” because of the name his great-grandfather has established in Virginia. Macon Dead is, however, more concerned with visiting Danville, where Rev. Cooper and his friends hold both Macon Deads in such high regard. He tells Milkman, “I ought to go by and see some of those boys before these legs stop moving. Let Freddie pick up the rents, maybe” (334). Whereas Macon Dead always has tried to instill in Milkman that “Money is . . . [t]he only real freedom there is” (163), the fact

that he would even consider, “maybe” letting someone else collect the rent from his tenants marks a significant change in him. Returning to the place where he had worked “right alongside” (234) his father and reestablishing a connection with the men who held his father in such high regard seems the antidote to this fragmented character, who formerly only felt connected to his money and the things he owns.

Finally, the truth of the Dead family heritage becomes the ultimate the gold that Milkman finds and shares with Pilate and Macon Dead. As a result of learning his family heritage, Milkman, Pilate, and Macon Dead heal, in the sense that knowing their family heritage makes them whole. In essence, Milkman’s journey demonstrates the power of memory, and (re)membering, to heal the cultural “dis-ease” of self-loathing and self-hate. For example, once Macon learns the significance of his family name in Shalimar, he seemingly heals from the sense of self-loathing that leads him to place more value in earning money than in cultivating relationships. Macon bequeaths this sense of self-loathing to Milkman, who, prior to learning the truth of his family heritage, seeks nothing more than to distance himself from his family and to align himself with Guitar.

Consequently, *Song of Solomon* epitomizes the novel as “a literary formulation of traditional chants and talk stories used in the process of curing the culturally ill” (Wilentz 4). The fact that the real “song” of Solomon emerges as a children’s game resembling the West African Ring shout substantiates this claim. The circular formation and the recitation of Solomon’s son’s, Jake’s, story, exemplify the recovery of healing traditions from historically suppressed worldviews and their power “for repairing fractured communities and diseased cultures” (4). Specifically, the narrative within the children’s game that Milkman witnesses

resolves the internal conflict within Milkman, his father, and Pilate, each of whom suffers from the pain of being disconnected from their family and cultural heritage.

Glass notes that “the Ring Shout always had an African core or base that was constantly refreshed by new importations of Africans right up to the eve of the Civil War” (44). She delineates seven distinctly African elements of the Ring Shout, including “circular formation, percussion, pantomime, polyrhythms, orientation to the earth, and centrality of the community . . . , as well as call and response” (44). Among these characteristics, the circular formation, pantomime, orientation to the earth, centrality of the community, and call and response emerge in the children’s game that Milkman witnesses. The children’s circular movement and the twirling around of the boy at the center of the circle illuminate the circular formation. The center boy’s twirling around with his hands outstretched, along with his pointing to the children as they move in the outer circle, elucidates the African concept of pantomime. Milkman recalls, “if the child’s finger pointed at nobody, missed, they started up again” (302). These gestures re-enact Solomon’s choosing Jake as the only one of his children he would take with him as he stretched his arms and flew home to Africa. Furthermore, whomever the boy at the center of the circle pointed at remained standing, while the other children “dropped to their knees” (299) when “the twirling boy stopped” (302). This description demonstrates not only the concept of pantomime, but also that of orientation to the earth. This latter concept emerges, as well, when, upon witnessing the children’s game and learning about his heritage, Milkman feels “exhilarated by simply walking the earth” and that his legs were like “tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil” (281).

The children’s game evokes the Ring Shout’s centrality to the community in three main ways. First, it brings them together to share the lore of their community. Secondly, Milkman

witnesses the game and his own family's centrality to the history and lore of the fictional town of Shalimar. Finally, the way the children recite the words of the song, and their responding "*Come booba yalle, come booba tambe*" and "*Come konka yalle, come konka tambee*" (303, author's emphasis) exemplifies the call-and-response pattern, as does the fact that they end the song with a literal shouting of Jake's name, to which they respond, physically, by stooping to the ground. These African elements of the Ring Shout heal Milkman by helping to reconnect him -- and, by extension, Macon and Pilate -- with his African heritage.

Many of the aforementioned characteristics of the African Ring Shout resonated in actual twentieth and twenty-first century African American communities. For example, an account in *Drums and Shadows* (1940) of "Possum Point," an African American community in South Carolina, shows remarkable similarities to what Milkman witnesses in Shalimar, Virginia. Members of the Georgia Writers' Project recorded a description by a Possum Point resident, identified only as "Aunt Jane," of a dance called "Come Down tuh duh Myuh." She reflected, "We dance roun an shake duh han an fiddle duh foot. One ub us kneel down in duh succle. Den we all call out an rise shout roun, an we all fling duh foot agen" (141). Aside from the fact that "Come Down tuh duh Myuh" does not state that the person in the middle is always a male, as Milkman notices is the case in the children's dance circle, the two dances seem identical. Although superficial in its exploration into the history, folklore, folk music, and dialect among African Americans in the coastal region of Georgia and South Carolina, the study at least confirms the cultural retention of ring dances in some African American communities.¹³⁶

Similarly, twentieth- and twenty-first century children's games among the Georgia Sea Islanders represent the centrality of the community in their tradition of "entertaining their

¹³⁶ *Drums and Shadows* limits its scope to certain "definitive types," which yet remain undefined. Georgia Writers' Project investigators had no formal training in ethnological methods; consequently, the study bears content without the necessary cultural context. (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1940. 141. Print.)

children with play songs after the day's work was done" (Jones-Jackson xii). More often than not, the songs reveal tales with distinct African parallels, such as animal trickster figures and tales of the supernatural (Appendix Figure 5.1).¹³⁷ The fact that the Gullah residents in South Carolina and Georgia live in isolation from other racial groups -- like the residents of Shalimar, Virginia, in *Song of Solomon* -- aids in their ability to preserve their culture. A similar aspect of community centrality emerges in the folktale "People Who Could Fly," which tells the story of African slaves in America who "stretched out their arms, and flew away" (Lester 152). This history of the Ring Shout attests to its power as an agent of healing within the African American community. Stuckey notes, "The ring in which Africans danced and sang is key to understanding the means by which they achieved oneness in America" (12). The ring itself fostered a sense of community by offering a way for African slaves in America not only to circumvent the various language barriers that separated them, but also to preserve shared elements of their cultures, which proved crucial to African slaves' survival in America. Stuckey posits, "With the Ring Shout as pivot, black dance radiated outward in America to become a formidable presence. . . . because it was more directly tied to the ancestral past, a source of creative inspiration for the African" ("Christian Conversion" 52). The children's game in *Song of Solomon* represents both the creativity and the power of healing that the ancestral past engenders. *Song of Solomon* demonstrates the value of myth, in general, in preserving folk culture, and it elucidates the Ring Shout, in particular, as a reservoir of African culture in America. By conflating both African myth and dance, *Song of Solomon* attests to the value of cultural memory as an agent of healing.

¹³⁷Three tales among the Gullah people along the Georgia Islands include tales about how various animals received their physical characteristics, how Ber Rabbit outwits the wolf, and how bones with the power to speak reveal tales of murder and displacement.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

As indicated in this examination of African American women writers, the concept of dance as a cultural narrative represents the importance of maintaining an oral tradition in order to subvert white male hegemony and build a sense of community around a shared African heritage. Two constants emanate through this cross-genre examination. First, as a motif, dance represents the African concept of call-and response not only as a means of creating a community but also as a means of reinforcing the lack of community. For example, the African American dance scenes in *Quicksand* serve as a constant reminder to Helga Crane of her alienation from both the African American and European communities from which she seeks acceptance. Each time she witnesses black bodies dancing, she feels uncomfortable. On one hand, she finds herself dancing to the strong African rhythms; on the other hand, she is embarrassed at her movement because she sees herself as an outsider to the black community. With each reminder of her outsider status, Helga flees in search of a community where feels she belongs. Each sense of flight, for Helga, represents her call for a sense of community. From another perspective, the black dancing bodies that Helga witnesses issue a figurative call for Helga to identify herself as a part of the black communities she encounters. From either perspective, every moment of discomfort and/or embarrassment that Helga experiences when in the midst of black dancing bodies signals a lack of response, or Helga's failure to assimilate successfully within the black community.

In the succeeding chapters, dance becomes a means of establishing a community. For example, in *Mules and Men*, Hurston elucidates various types of ring dances as a vital aspect of community-building. In her native Eatonville, Florida, hometown, these dances have functioned

as a form of resistance to European attempts to dissect African culture. Simultaneously, the ring dances Hurston examines function as a type of reservoir of performative African culture in both the secular realm, as in the all-black town of Eatonville, and sacred realms, as in the voodoo ceremonies in Haiti. In both instances, Hurston illuminates the ring formation as a communal response to a call for audience participation in either the sport of storytelling, which she records in Eatonville, or the ring dances that originated on the southern slave plantations and continue to emerge in southern black social and religious settings.

For Sanchez, the call and response dynamic is more literal. As a product of the Black Arts and Black Power Movements, Sanchez's *A Blues Book for Blue Black Magical Women* issues a call for a literal movement – an exodus of African American women, out of the mire of white male control and toward a sense of nation-building based on shared African values. Similarly, in *for colored girls*, Shange uses the voice and presence of a singular woman of color, the lady in brown, to call for Africana women's collective rendering, through poetry and dance, of their experiences. Consequently, *for colored girls* subverts the power of European written language and illuminates the universal language of dance, which is key to community-building and healing, especially for black women, who have been silenced and objectified in a white patriarchal society.

Finally, in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison demonstrates the significance of call-and-response in piecing together the fragmented history of Africans in America. In *Song of Solomon*, members of an African American family unit recover significant aspects of their history; and, in the process, they recover spiritually, both from recalling various aspects of their family history and from the missing elements of this history that emerge in a children's game. Both the game and the character's collective recollections embody the West African Ring Shout. Similar to the

ring dances in *Mules and Men*, the Ring Shout in *Song of Solomon* becomes a site of cultural memory, which is important for African Americans in establishing a sense of connection to their African heritage and understanding their presence in America.

Furthermore, what is most significant to me about ending this project with an examination of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is that, in this novel, Morrison amasses the performance themes and motifs in each of the preceding literary works. The children's game in *Song of Solomon* shows the importance of African Americans understanding their history early on in order to have a sense of rootedness and a firm foundation in America. In *Quicksand*, however, Helga Crane views the students as children when they perform as “automatons” (52) in the military drill. This scene represents Helga’s contention that the concept of racial uplift, which is espoused by president of the college where she works in Naxos, is lost on the students, as well as on Helga, who views their performance as stifling and antithetical to this very concept. Also, through the children's game in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison demonstrates the significance of folktales in Africana culture, just as Hurston does in the first section of *Mules and Men*. Moreover, the children's game Morrison describes in *Song of Solomon* represent ring dances as sites of cultural memory, as do the children's games Hurston observes in *Mules and Men*. Similarly, in both *A Blues Book* and *for colored girls*, the references to children’s games demonstrate their significance in the process of developing from childhood to adulthood. In the second part of *Mules and Men*, just as Hurston elucidates West African culture subsumed in religious ritual and performance in African American culture, Morrison depicts the West African Ring Shout subsumed in an African American children's game. In both instances, representative dance scenes mask historical and cultural African American narratives existing beneath the surface. Similar to the way the African-based dance scenes in *Quicksand* represent Helga

Crane's inability to connect fully with her African heritage, both *Mules and Men* and *Song of Solomon* illuminate the way in which cultural practices such as children's games, folktales, and dance lose significant aspects of African American history and culture as a result of European influences. Both *Song of Solomon* and Sanchez's *Blues Book* highlight the importance of knowing one's history and demonstrate how, also as in *Mules and Men*, music and movement effectively preserve vital elements of African history and culture. *Song of Solomon* is similar to *Shane's for colored girls* in its focus on the historical and cultural significance of the community as an agent of healing, by way of African concept of call-and-response.

On the whole, these African American women authors demonstrate the multiple ways in which dance functions as a site of cultural memory. In *Quicksand*, black dancing bodies represent Helga's lack of cultural memory. Her repulsion to the various black dancing bodies she witnesses, as well as the embarrassment she experiences when she finds herself dancing to African American music underscore this idea. In *Mules and Men*, Hurston posits black dance as a mode of cultural survival. As a "featherbed of resistance," black dance represents African Americans' ability to maintain significant aspects of their African spirituality in a Western context that distinguishes between sacred and secular. Dance takes on a less literal and far more figurative representation in Sanchez's *A Blues Book*. In this book of poetry, Sanchez maintains that African American women cannot assume their rightful positions as "Queens of the Universe" until they understand their history of Africans in America. Only then, she maintains, can African American women work together to rebuild the black family and, consequently, the black community. Similarly, *for colored girls* uses dance as a means for African women to build a community of support for each other based on their shared African heritage. Finally,

Song of Solomon posits the African Ring Shout as a site of cultural memory that helps African Americans to reconnect the fragmented pieces of their history lost to slavery.

Finally, my dissertation serves as a catalyst for future research and publication opportunities. For example, since beginning my work on this dissertation, I have presented my research at numerous conferences and published essays in scholarly journals. My essay entitled “Dance Transgression” appears in the Fall 2005 issue of the *Langston Hughes Review*, and my essay entitled “Cultural Memory in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Mules and Men*” appears in *The Funk Era and Beyond: New Perspectives on Black Popular Culture* (2008). Furthermore, the research I conducted for the chapter on Hurston’s *Mules and Men*, provides material that I hope to develop into a cross-genre examination of Hurston’s work using black dance as a repository of African culture. As well, the research I conducted for the chapter on Shange’s *for colored girls*, in which I analyze the power of dance to subvert the Western concept of a written language, provides a framework for future research and publication on Multicultural American women writers’ use of dance as a repository of their non-Western cultural values. Ultimately, I hope to show that African American women writers’ uses of dance as sites of cultural memory will challenge existing scholarship on the African American vernacular tradition. As John Roberts does for African American literature, in *From Trickster to Badman*, I hope to show the ways in which women of color, in general, use dance as a means of cultural survival and community-building.

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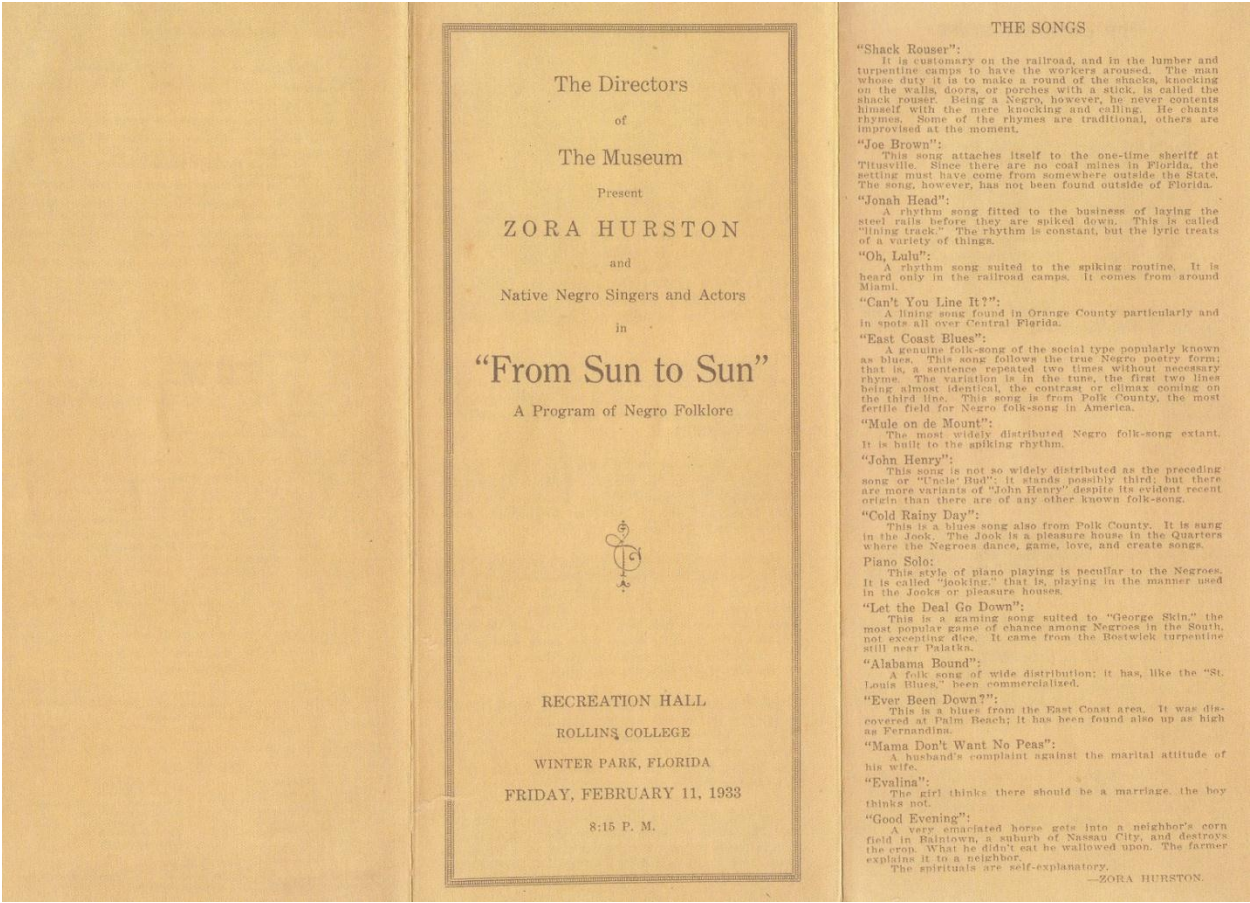
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APPENDICES

FIGURE 2.1A



Front cover of "From Sun to Sun" Program

FIGURE 2.1B

THE EXECUTIVE STAFF

BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE MUSEUM

George Barber	Marion Morrow
Martha Davenport	Janet Sessongood
William Harrington	Frank Wetherell
Rob-Roy Mize	Nan Chapin
Foster Russell	Nat French
Mary Trowbridge	Sara Luce
Eleanor Wright	Barbara Reed
Louise Brett	Alice Lee Swan
Twanet Evans	Jay Williams
James Holden	Betty Young

The scenery for "From Sun to Sun" was designed and executed by Iven Tate, young Negro artist of Orlando, Florida.

In 1932 Iven won the first prize offered annually by the Florida Federation of Fine Arts for oil paintings by amateurs.

Announcements:

The Directors of the Museum inaugurated their work with Zora Hurston because they want to make themselves and others more familiar with the richness of the material at their own doorstep.

The Directors will present during the remaining months of the school year bills of original one-act plays, musical programs, dance interpretations, and selections from classical and modern dramatic literature. The aim of this organization is to collect and develop Florida folk material, to interpret in fresh new ways the plays of well-known writers, and to present the creative work of local students.

This theatre building is for the group a workshop where interested and serious students, working together, can get a knowledge of accepted stage technique and begin to develop a technique of their own.

This place is known as The Museum, a house for the arts.

ZORA HURSTON

Zora Hurston is a native of Florida. She was born in Eatonville, the first incorporated Negro town in America, and there began her education. Later she attended the grammar school in Jacksonville, then went to Morgan Academy in Baltimore, Maryland.

In 1927 she was admitted to Barnard College—the first Negro to be admitted to this school. At Barnard she majored in anthropology under Dr. Frank Boas and was graduated in 1928. To satisfy the graduation requirements at Barnard she returned to the South to do research work. For many months she explored in the field of Negro folklore and amassed the largest collection ever made in that field. Part of the folk tales she assembled was published by the American Folklore Society.

After her graduation she spent a year and a half collecting material on survivals of African hoodoo practices in America. This material was recently published in Germany and released to the members of the American Ethnological Society.

She is a member of the American Ethnological Society. She belongs also to the American Folklore Society, the American Anthropological Society, the New York Academy of Sciences and the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Her stories and research articles have appeared in *The Survey Graphic*, in *The World Tomorrow*, and in *The New Negro*, a volume by Boni and Boni. In 1931 Zora wrote a play about life in her native village. In 1932 she entered the concert field because she saw that the spirituals and other so-called Negro songs being sung in New York and elsewhere on concert stages were, as she says, "to the real Negro what oleomargarine is to butter."

Her first concert was held in the John Golden Theatre on January 19. It was well attended and well received. The critics wrote enthusiastically about the program. The Theatre Arts Magazine staff photographers made pictures of her cast of Harlem Negroes and used one of these photographs in their publication.

She hopes to found a Negro theatre for her own people. She wants to write her own plays, direct Negro casts in Negro dramas, and present them to a Negro audience. She wants occasionally to have the white friends of the Negroes to watch these performances.

FROM SUN TO SUN

(a day in a railroad camp)

A program of original Negro folk-lore

- The Arousal:**
Place: In the Quarters
Time: Before Day
a. The Shack-Houser wakes the camp (John Hamm); male chorus then sings.
b. "Joe Brown" is sung as they leave the Quarters.
- Whipping Steel:**
Place: Down the Railroad Track a Piece
Time: Broad Daylight
a. "Jonah Head"—lining rhythm led by Lawrence Williams.
b. "Oh, Lulu"—spiking rhythm led by William Brown.
c. "Can't You Line It"—lining again led by Lawrence Williams.
d. A woman walks down the track counting railroad ties and sings her blues: "East Coast Blues"—sung by Zora Hurston.
e. "Mule on de Mount"—spiking more steel led by Lawrence Williams.
f. "John Henry"—led by Lawrence Williams.
- Back in the Quarters:**
Place: In and Around the Jook
Time: Dusk-dark
a. Children's games.
b. "Mister Frog"—lullaby sung by Florence Moseley.
- In the Quarters:**
Place: In and Around the Jook
Time: Dusk-dark
a. A walking preacher wanders in. He is given momentary notice.
b. "You Can't Hide, Sinner"—led by James Tobbs.
c. Sermon.
d. "Sit Down, Angel."

INTERMISSION: TEN MINUTES

- Black Dark in the Night:**
Place: In the Jook
a. "Cold Rainy Day."
b. Piano Solo played by Evelyn Moseley.
c. "Let the Deal Go Down" (with Georgia Skin).
d. "Alabama Bound"—led by James Tobbs.
e. Guitar Solo, played by David Calhoun.
f. "If You Ever Been Down"—led by Lawrence Williams.
- "The Fiery Chariot": An original Negro folk-play (a folk-tale dramatized by Zora Hurston).**
- Way in the Midnight:**
Place: In the Palm Wood
a. Bahaman fire dance.
b. "Belshazzar"—led by Lawrence Williams.
c. "Mama Don't Want No Pear"—led by James Tobbs.
d. "Evelina"—led by Zora Hurston.
e. "Ring Play."
f. Crow Dance led by Zora Hurston.
g. "Good Evening."

CURTAIN

The Actors:

Water Boy	John Hamm
Shack-Houser	John Hamm
The Preacher	Reverend Isaiah Hurston

In the One-Act Play:

Dinah	Zora Hurston
De Lawd	James Tobbs
The Child	Oscar Anderson

The Singers:

Oscar Anderson	David Calhoun
James Tobbs	Evelyn Moseley
John Hamm	Reverend Isaiah Hurston
William Curtis	Rosa Lee Taylor
William J. Brown	Beth Marshall
Lawrence Williams	Florence Moseley
Maxie Day	Zora Hurston
Leonard Horton	

The Children:

Laura Croome	Willie Dukes	Laura Alexander
Hoit Croome	Mildred Croome	Nelson

Back Cover of "From Sun to Sun" Program

FIGURE 2.2

artist, was a combination of things that didn't match up in 1920s. She was a storyteller in the folk sense and an intellectual in the sense. She was a woman with a formal education and the audacity to smoke, though she would remain a political conservative. Her gift for language and her way with language were evident in all that she did—on documentary films she made, and in the theater she produced. The ability to connect with people in her academic, business, and personal life sing with her. And Zora remained a free spirit.

While she was busily working, the appeal and excitement of New York as the capital of the twenties thrilled her. She went to church and to rent parties and teas and soirees uptown and down, and danced and held forth with the stories of Eatonville. She strolled Central Harlem's Lenox and was as self-aware of her sharpness and place in the world as any hardened-out Harlemit. She looked great in dresses and was known for the outfits she often wore. "In uptown Manhattan," Zora wrote, "one puts on clothes and fares forth to pass the time pleasantly with friends and strangers and most important of all, the strangers he is sure of meeting."

It is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.

First Tracks on a Road

It was not always about profiling as she made her way around uptown. She collected material for her anthropological studies. The stories of her black men and women, pulling out a pair of calipers—a measuring tool used by anthropologists to measure head sizes—are legendary. If a woman consented, she'd produce her calipers and take care of the business and there.

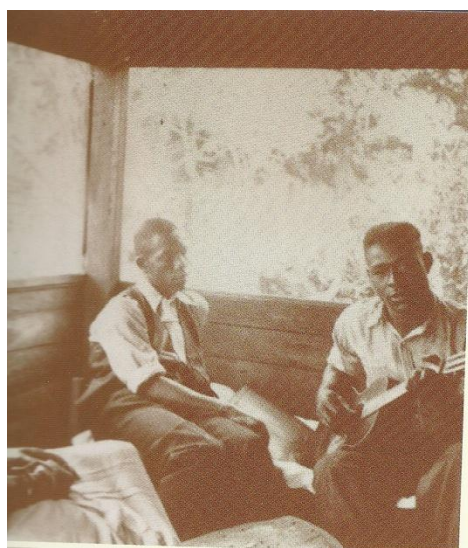
Du Bois' biographer, Arnold Rampersad, put it, Zora's commitment to her rural background "set her apart from virtually all other writers, black and white. This and the mentoring of renowned anthropologist Franz Boas at Columbia University, enabled her to develop into an unquestioned African-American folklore.

As she wrote in the introduction to *Mules and Men*, collecting folklore "would be an experience for me. When I pitched headforemost into the world I was in the crib of negroism." But the process of doing her work would not be so difficult for her familiarity with the insiders. "It was only when I was off in the world from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody



Speak, So You Can Speak Again 17

Hurston demonstrating the Crow Dance

FIGURE 2.3: Hurston's production of *The Great Day*

TO BOTTOM): Zora (left) hearing songs in Eatonville in
right) and the cast of her 1932 folk musical, *The Great Day*.
plays a drum she brought back from a 1936-37 trip to
ENCLOSED): A handwritten draft of the first chapter
the Weeping God (transcription, page 34). Zora's classic
dialogue and images of southern communities in a manner
by Zora's attentive field observations.

Can Speak Again

"children," who worked with them as a typist on the project. "Now about the play itself . . ." she wrote to him "It was my story from beginning to end. It is my dialogue, my situations. Therefore, with what had been proposed in mind, I realized that I could expect you to be promising many things that wouldn't do me a bit of good. That and that only is my reason for going it alone."

He answered her initial letter of explanation and she responded, "I suppose that both of us got worked up unnecessarily . . . I know that you are nervously constituted like me and so the less emotion the better. I am busy smoothing out my lovely brow at present and returning to normal. I am in fault in the end and you were in fault in the beginning." Ultimately, Wallace Thurman rewrote *Mule Bone* for Zora, and Hughes distanced himself from the project.

But it was not *Mule Bone* that Zora would become widely known for—her shining medium would be novels. Zora's contract with Mason ended in 1931. It was then that she was able to give more of her attention to fiction writing. In 1933, *Story* magazine published Zora's short story "The Gilded Six Bits." Bertram Lippincott of the J.B. Lippincott publishing firm read it and suggested that she write a novel. By the following year she had a manuscript, produced in little more than a couple of months during a stay in Sanford, Florida. She titled it *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and based the story on her parents' marriage. The novel was a critical success, especially as a first novel. Zora was appreciated by critics for her candor and for, as Martha Gruening of *The New Republic* put it, being an insider of the world she re-created in fiction without displaying the "usual neuroses" of an insider. More than one reader of the novel pointed out that plot and character development were not Zora's strong suits, but didn't deny that the work was nevertheless effective and entertaining. Margaret Wallace in the *New York Times Book Review* described it as the "most vital and original novel about the American Negro that has been written by a member of the Negro race."

The advance of \$200 from *Jonah's Gourd Vine* made way for *Mules and Men*, the book Zora developed from the folklore she had gathered in her fieldwork in the South. Her second offer to publish came from Lippincott just a few months later.

In addition to writing novels, in the early 1930s Zora was also attempting to produce the folk material she had collected in the theater. She created *The Great Day*, a folk musical, which was performed in New York. Later, when she returned South, *The Great Day* became *From Sun to Sun*. This production was performed periodically in Florida, where it caught the attention of Mary McLeod Bethune, who founded Bethune Cookman College in Daytona, Florida. Bethune soon invited Zora to teach drama at the school. Zora arrived in January 1934 to teach and work with the students producing plays, forming a troupe that performed Negro folklore.

FIGURE 3.1



Aretha Franklin photo on album featuring “Respect”

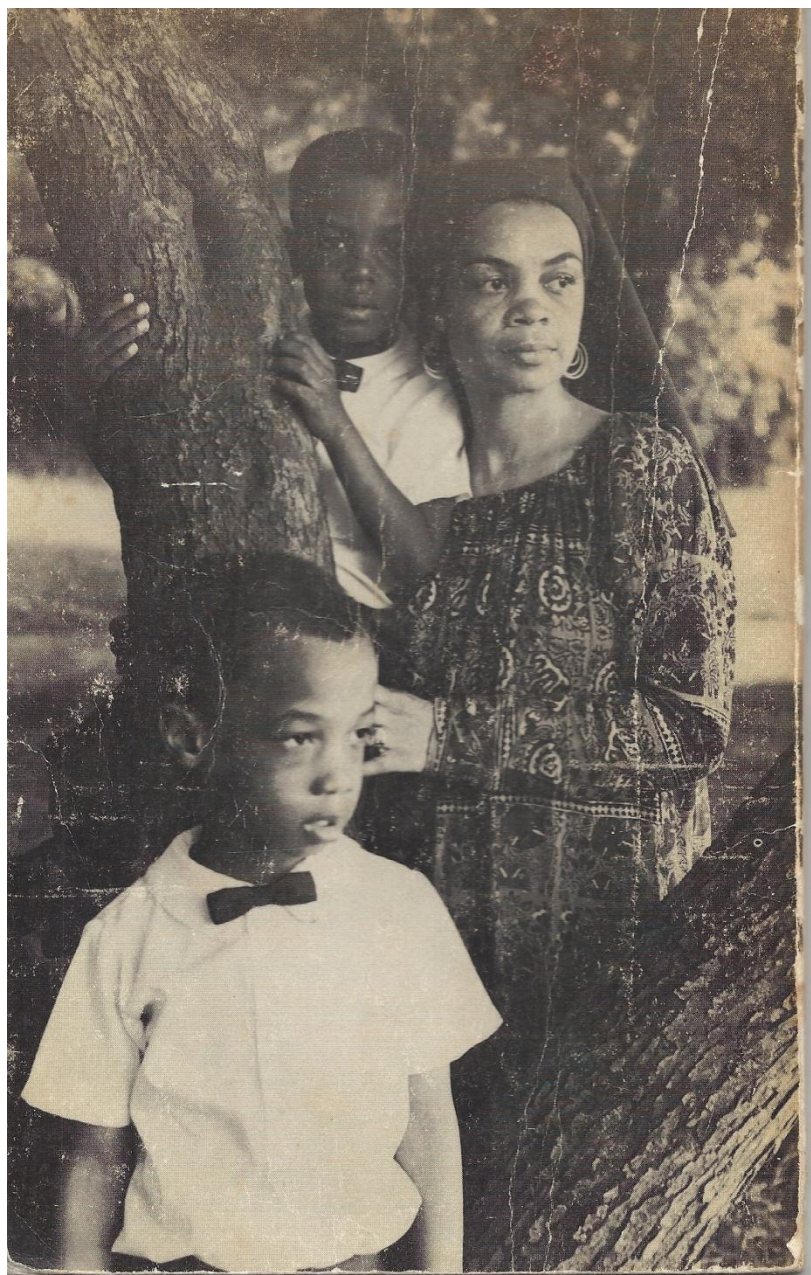


FIGURE3.2:Sanchez

FIGURE 3.3



Minister Malcolm X and other members of the Nation of Islam

FIGURE 3.4



Hindu Goddess Kali

FIGURE 4.1



The original Broadway cast of *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*. (l. to r.) Risë Collins, Paula Moss, Aku Kadogo, Laurie Carlos, Trazana Beverly, Ntozake Shange, and Janet League.

FIGURE 4.2



“A Layin on of Hands” featuring Dr. Freda Scott Giles as the Lady in Red