

Moving beyond Form:  
Communicating Identity through Dance

by

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## ABSTRACT

Moving beyond Form: Communicating Identity through Dance chronicles the journey of investigating my personal creative process in dance. This was a search for strategies to empower myself creatively, enabling me to move beyond the limitations of a prescribed form or style of dance and communicate ideas that were relevant to me. But on a deeper level, it was an exploration of my capacity to self-define through movement. The challenge led me to graduate school, international study with world-renowned choreographers and to the development of a holistic creative practice, Movement to Meaning. The aim of this creative practice is to express internal awareness through movement, thereby enabling the mover to dance from an internal reference point. In my research, I utilized Movement to Meaning to re-contextualize Sandia, a traditional-based dance that is indigenous to various Mande subgroups in West Africa. This project culminated in a choreographic presentation, *Ten For Every Thousand*, which was performed in October 2010 at the Nelson Fine Arts Center at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona.

For Jadesola, with prayers that his roots will grow deep and his  
branches strong.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

My love affair with dances of West Africa began in 1997 when I took a Caribbean dance class during my undergraduate program in African American Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. Two years later, what began as a casual interest quickly sprang into a lifestyle when I joined the first African dance company in Virginia, the Ezibu Muntu African Dance and Cultural Foundation located in Richmond. For eight years, I studied, performed and eventually taught many traditional-based West African dances that are indigenous to communities located in Senegal, Gambia, Mali and Burkina Faso. I grew increasingly more fascinated with the variety of dance forms just from this Western region of Africa. No matter where I travelled within the United States and even during a visit to Barbados in 2001, participation in West African-based dance classes always connected me to a community of artists who shared my passion for West African arts. Among these communities, I was one of many people in the African diaspora who fed on the energy of these dance forms and found personal relevancy in the context of learning and performing.

For several years, I studied and performed with Ezibu Muntu and also travelled to Washington, D.C. and New York to participate in workshops with expatriate Senegalese, Malian and Guinean dancers. Many of these dance educators were former members of their countries' national dance companies. During these foundational years of my dance practice, I found a great passion for the community dance practice that had become a large part of how I identified as an artist. Outside of community engagement, the biggest highlights were performing at Dance Africa, which is the most prestigious ongoing showcase of African dancing on the East Coast and directed artistically by Chuck Davis<sup>1</sup>. Every year, our company was invited to perform at the showcase in Washington D.C. and in 2004 we performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Those were good, memorable experiences for me that shaped how I viewed dance at that time. My idea of personal expression in dance existed strictly within the scope of the dance solo circle, which occurs as a regular part of West-African based dance classes and performances. The primary aim of performing a solo in this context is to express creativity and show individuality. But the secondary

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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for biographical information.



aim is to remain connected to the specific dance form that is being expressed at the time of the solo circle, and to adhere to the aesthetics of that dance (rhythmic accentuation, physical technique) while showing individuality. Years of improvisation practiced exclusively within the parameters of the solo circle eventually hindered my ability to freely engage in the creative process—for me, personal expression in dance existed only within the scope of a dance form. Although I enjoyed my work, I felt limited in my ability to express my ideas while adhering to a predefined structure.

In fact, all of my creative practice was oriented towards the perfection of performance. Prior to studying dance, I had been trained as a musician and performer. I studied and performed harp independently and with the Richmond Public Schools Harp Ensemble from 1994-2000. Much of my music training was focused on the mastery of a large repertoire of pieces to be performed at our numerous recitals. Performance etiquette came first; music theory was minimal and there was absolutely no practice in improvisation. Throughout high school I acted in plays, competing in regional showcases and developing a growing appreciation of how the body

can be transformed into any character on stage. But this was not improvisational performance—it was the recitation of lines that I interpreted according to the needs of the work. I rarely engaged in the practice of art for its sake. I never entered into the creative space to see what lay there waiting to be embodied, waiting to come to life. It was all work and no play.

I started to question the rigid boundaries that defined my creative approach. Even the concept of play was structured for me, and I felt a growing need to express myself through movement in a way that was unrestricted by dance form or function. During the fall of 2007, I began a serious investigation of my creative process in dance. Specifically, I was interested in how I could move beyond the limitations of a prescribed form or style of dance to communicate my own creative ideas. But on a deeper level, it was an exploration of my capacity to self-define through movement. Ultimately, this quest was about finding ways to empower myself. The challenging and inspiring journey led me to graduate school, international study with world-renowned choreographers and to the development of a holistic method of creative exploration,

Movement to Meaning<sup>2</sup>. In my current research project, I utilized Movement to Meaning to re-contextualize Sandia<sup>3</sup>, a traditional-based dance that is indigenous to various Mande subgroups in West Africa. This document is a snapshot of points along my journey to find meaning in movement that supersedes imposed structure.

To begin, I assessed the knowledge bank I already had, which was the extensive practice and study of dances indigenous to West Africa. Dance in West Africa is meaningful within a specific context and for a specific purpose. Although, the content and themes of a given dance may have universal applications, in its cultural context meaning and symbolism are directly connected to the dance's function in society, as dance is an expression of social values. For example, there are castes of oral historians, or jeliya, who preserve the history of family lineages in many Mande communities by serving as linguists, musicians, teachers, royal spokespeople and

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<sup>2</sup> Movement to Meaning is the creative practice I developed in this research project in order to facilitate the re-contextualization of a West African dance. The primary components of Movement to Meaning are energy work (breathing exercises and energy sharing), meditation and investigation of meaning.

<sup>3</sup> Sandia is also known as Lamban or Lamba, depending on where the dance is practiced. In the United States, it's commonly called Lamban. In Bamako, the dance is referred to as Sandia.

mediators. Sandia is the name for the specific dance and musical style of the jeliya. The concepts of honor and grace are embodied in this dance, as the jeliya serve as the unifying force that holds its communities together. They provide access to knowledge of one's history as a people and ultimately of oneself. Sandia dancing occurs as a function of numerous social events, such as weddings and community gatherings. However, unless it occurs among a group of individuals who have shared understanding of Sandia, the meaning and symbolism of Sandia dancing is lost outside of its socio-cultural context.

I danced Sandia for many years with Ezibu Muntu and studied the history of various cultures of West Africa during my undergraduate coursework. But I was interested in how meaning evolved when elements of West African-based dances were expressed outside of the cultural contexts in which these dances reflect community values. Culture changes constantly, and dance reflects both the shifts in cultural values and their continuity. I knew that dances of West Africa evolved within their own communities, and that the dances I performed with Ezibu Muntu had roots in West Africa. But our American choreographers had

further developed the dances that comprised our West African-based repertoire. Even though these dances continued to evolve in the United States, we still defined our work as West African. I questioned what made our dances more African than the repertoire any other American dance company with no obvious ties to West Africa. Giving myself permission to question what I had been taught, I posed questions that were seemingly taboo before, like when is Sandia not Sandia anymore? If I'm dancing Sandia, and I change the pattern of arm movements so it looks more like Mandiani (a Malinke female dance of initiation), then is it called 'Mandiani' or 'Sandia'? Or is it entirely something else? What if I never actually danced Sandia because I was not a jeliya? Or perhaps it was only truly Sandia when the dance occurred inside its socio-cultural setting in West Africa? The labels that defined my creative practice were suddenly under investigation. Why couldn't I just 'dance'?

I began to play with movement, using what was already familiar to my body as a starting place. It was strange, yet liberating, to simply move! After years of working with the goal of performance in mind—with that work always being tied to a specific

movement practice—I was fascinated with the possibilities that now lay before me. But during my exploration, I found that I wanted to send my body into places for which it did not have a reference point—my body and thinking were programmed to work in specific ways that I had no idea how to manipulate to better serve my current needs. Most of my dance training was in West African-based movement forms and I did not know how to communicate my own ideas with my dance vocabulary. This quest for identity and self-actualization led me to graduate school, hoping to gain tools to help me express myself.

When I began my studies as a graduate student in dance, I quickly learned that I had a lot to figure out on my own. My colleagues had all been trained in American post-modern contemporary dance prior to attending the graduate program, and I was the only student looking for a way to take a West African-based dance background into another realm of exploration. I felt completely lost, disconnected from my peers and quite misunderstood. Thankfully I later found a dance community abroad who shared similar values, but until that time I felt alone in my work. I was new to Tempe, Arizona, having uprooted my life from

Virginia in order to attend graduate school, and had not bonded with the local West African dance community. It was early in my journey, and I had not yet been exposed to solutions created by other emerging and established choreographers to embody their identities using traditional dance forms. In fact, I was unfamiliar with artists like Ronald K. Brown<sup>4</sup> and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar<sup>5</sup>, both of whom utilized African-derived and Western contemporary dance practices to embody multiple aspects of the African American experience. For the most part my teachers offered me as much help as they could, but either they did not understand my vision or did not have the tools to help me. So I took advantage of what our instructors could offer me; I studied postmodern contemporary dance. I tried to incorporate my West African vocabulary into choreography, and I created work that I defined as contemporary dance. I was grateful for what I learned in those classes, but I noticed things that compelled me to continue searching. I felt as though I was losing certain qualities within my style of movement—losing my own essence and character that shined when I danced

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A for biographical information.

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix A for biographical information.

West African-based dances. In addition, I did not feel successful at expressing my ideas and intention in my work.

After a year and a half in the dance program, I still struggled with the question of how I could find meaning in my background of West African-based dances outside of their original socio-cultural contexts. Although I did not have the words to describe it then, what I came to understand is that I wanted to re-contextualize elements of West African-based dances in ways that were personally meaningful, and that superseded any imposition of style and structure. Dances are re-contextualized constantly, within West Africa and outside the continent. Even my experience as an American performer of traditional West African dances was a re-contextualization! More than a superficial transplanting of dances and music from one cultural knowledge system to another, I wanted to communicate through movement—regardless of whether the movement was inspired from a particular movement style or not. Intuitively I knew that the process would involve more than just a manipulation of movements. After attending my first dance training in Senegal, I began to understand my plight as one of a larger phenomenon that is happening globally. During my first trip to



L'Ecole des Sables International Centre for Traditional and Contemporary African Dance in Toubab Dialaw, Senegal, I met dancers from Brazil, Cambodia, Spain, and various West African countries who brought their vernacular dances to the contemporary dance workshop—African dances, martial arts, salsa, hip hop, break dancing, etc. Like me, these dancers were searching. They were looking for ways to move beyond the boundaries of their vernacular dance languages and find their unique identities in dance.

My own search led me deeper into a practice that had long been a central part of my life—meditation. I took a class that introduced me to the idea of cultivating mindfulness in the artistic creative process. By incorporating meditative practices into my investigation of dance, I was able to create an environment conducive to unlimited creative exploration. I learned how to listen to my impulse to move, and how to non-judgmentally accept my creative work. I learned that art takes on a life of its own—and that through calming the mind I could develop the ability to feel the flow of energy through a phrase or choreographed dance. Building on this concept, I later had the opportunity to study Germaine

Acogny's<sup>6</sup> Modern African Dance Technique in depth. Both Acogny technique and mindful approaches to creativity involve sensing and honoring what is happening in the body and the creative work. There is a great respect for energy in Acogny technique, and I found many common connections between Acogny technique and using meditation in my creative explorations. In this research project, I utilized Movement to Meaning and various choreography tools to re-contextualize Sandia. My years of preparation and study led me to my final year as an MFA Dance candidate at Arizona State University School of Dance. This inquiry culminated in a choreography presentation at the Nelson Fine Arts Center in October 2010. The dance work born of this process, *Ten for Every Thousand*, was a contemplation of the loss of our collective history as descendants of displaced Africans.

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix A for biographical information.

## CHAPTER 2

### BACKGROUND

There are many voices that collectively guided me through my journey for self-definition through dance. This was a personal quest for understanding that led to the fulfillment of my MFA in dance and the production of *Ten for Every Thousand*. In the process of exploring movement and conceptual ideas, choreographing and making sense of what began to take shape, I was grateful for the support of my teachers and my predecessors in the realm of African dance re-contextualization. My dance training and field studies in Senegal and Mali strengthened and shaped my journey through education and connecting me with communities of artists who had similar goals. My formal education took place through field studies and professional dance training at L'Ecole des Sables and Yeredon. Informally I gained knowledge through conversations with Malian scholar, Sekou Camara<sup>7</sup>, and several teachers, colleagues and aspiring choreographers with whom I lived while in Africa. Camara was my primary informant regarding Bamana dances and Malian history, and his support was

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix A for biographical information.

crucial to my understanding the functions of dance in Bamana communities.

Another mentor whose instruction and support was vital to my development is Germaine Acogny, who is the director of L'Ecole des Sables and a leader in the field of contemporary African dance. Acogny's teachings on the importance of connecting the breath cycle to the body's movement in dance, as well as her focus on energy, became the foundational components of Movement to Meaning. My process of investigating meaning in Sandia beyond the structure of the dance also involved a deconstruction method taught by Patrick Acogny<sup>8</sup> during my first dance workshop at L'Ecole des Sables. Forerunners in the re-contextualization of African-derived material for the American concert stage were choreographers Pearl Primus<sup>9</sup> and Katherine Dunham<sup>10</sup>, who questioned what they had been taught and refused to accept limitations imposed upon their identities as female dancers of African descent. They found ways to self-define through their artistic work and ultimately became leaders for many to follow.

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix A for biographical information.

<sup>9</sup> See Appendix A for biographical information.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix A for biographical information.

Primus and Dunham both travelled to their ancestral homes to develop their creative work and identities, and I found it interesting that my journey took a similar route. In addition, Germaine Acogny and Dunham codified movement techniques as tools of personal empowerment, creating strategies for others to empower themselves beyond the scope of what conventional dance practices could offer. This next section will highlight the research and experiences abroad that profoundly impacted my search for meaning in dance and gave rise to new questions.

#### If I stand tall...

At the start of this research project, I had already accomplished fieldwork and professional dance training in West Africa. In 2008, I spent one month in Bamako, Mali studying and training intensively in Bamana dances, language and culture, and traditional music transcribed to guitar. I also took classes in contemporary dance, and I had the great fortune to attend several social functions where dancing took place. I benefitted from the guidance and instruction of Sekou Camara, who made great efforts to accompany me to various events and acted as narrator and translator. The summer of 2009 led me to the 5 Continents

Workshop: Professional Dance Training in Africa at L'Ecole des Sables in Toubab Dialaw, Senegal. There I trained with Germaine Acogny in her contemporary dance technique and explored re-contextualization with Patrick Acogny. Exercises in choreography, contemporary dance, traditional-based dances and discourse comprised the foundation of this workshop. Over the course of the program, I was very fortunate to learn from the following choreographers and dance educators: Nora Chipaumire of Zimbabwe, Souleymane Badolo of Burkina Faso, Irene Tassebedo of Burkina Faso, Cire Beye of Senegal, Bertrand Saky of Cote d'Ivoire, Jean Tamba of Senegal-Cassamance and Benjamin Lamarche of France.

At the conclusion of the 5 Continents Workshop, I was honored to be selected as the first American to receive extensive training in the pedagogy and practice of Germaine Acogny's Modern African Dance Technique. The First Workshop for Transmission of Germaine Acogny's technique was a seven-week professional training workshop. The course was focused primarily on the dissemination of Acogny technique, along with other areas of instruction that helped illustrate various concepts related to the

technique—including contemporary dance with Patrick Acogny, Sabar dance with Cire Beye and short classes in traditional-based dances from Benin, Togo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. As one of 15 students, I was able to begin an in-depth study of the theory and practice of this profound dance technique. Classes were held in two studios, where we danced on both a sand floor and a Marley dance floor. However, much of the technical instruction occurred outside of the studio, where we had direct access to the natural environment that is the inspiration for Acogny technique. There is a great respect and manipulation of energy in Acogny Technique. This energy awareness was woven into every technique class through focusing on where the energy enters the physical body, and how it travels throughout the body in every movement.

During the course of my field studies and training abroad, I collected data through participating in classes, dancing in the community, maintaining detailed journals and taking video and photo documentation whenever permitted. In addition, I conducted personal interviews with many of my teachers, who are some of the foremost choreographers in re-contextualizing African dances.

It's because I stand on the shoulders of those who came before me.

Although my teachers were predominately from the African continent, I am indebted to my American predecessors whose work laid the foundation for my research. Lynne Emery wrote the first comprehensive study of the dance forms of people of African origin. In Black Dance: From 1619 to Today, Emery highlights the work of Trinidad-born Pearl Primus, who studied anthropology and empowered communities in New York through dance education. Although Asadata Dafora, originally from Sierra Leone, was the first to experiment with material from African heritage with his 1934 production, *Kyunkor* (Emery 250), Pearl Primus was the first woman of African descent to re-contextualize dances of Africa for the American stage. The presentation of African cultural arts with dignity is seen as one of the great contributions of Pearl Primus to American society. First appearing as a professional dancer in 1943, Primus presented *African Ceremonial* at the YMHA in New York as a culmination of her carefully researched investigation of West African dance forms (Emery 262). Dance researcher, Julia L. Foulkes, asserted that through research and re-staging Primus attempted to preserve indigenous dances within a foreign western



model (Foulkes 88). Combining the studies of dance and anthropology, Primus spent considerable time studying dance with indigenous people throughout Africa, and most notably serving two years as director of Liberia's Performing Arts Center (Emery 265). I felt a strong connection to the work of Primus, because my quest for self-definition through dance was also based on research.

Katherine Dunham is another dance pioneer who created diasporic representations of dances primarily derived from Haitian and other Caribbean traditions. The work of Dunham opened the road for African American dance and dancers to emerge on the American arts scene. As explained by anthropologist and personal friend of Dunham, Joyce Aschenbrenner, Dunham's first work in re-contextualizing Caribbean dance forms surfaced in 1937, with her Chicago presentation of *L'Ag'Ya*, which was derived from dance traditions in Martinique (Aschenbrenner 45). Dunham's long career in dance consisted of international tours and consultancies, film work and the creation of numerous compositions, which transformed dance practices of Caribbean peoples into dances made relevant to the American concert stage. The contributions of Dunham to the development of American modern dance are too

lengthy to recite, but her codification of a technique that combined ballet with body isolations profoundly impacted future generations of modern dancers. Dunham was the first to create a systematic technique that incorporated West Indian-derived movements with American ballet (Aschenbrenner 109). Dunham re-contextualized dance traditions of Haiti, Trinidad and Jamaica (to name a few), and gave those movements meaning within the practice of an American modern dance technique.

Both Dunham and Germaine Acogny codified techniques that combined elements of ballet and dance practices of Africa or the Caribbean. Creating a technique is about embodying one's personal cultural knowledge system, and both of these women infused their Western dance training with movement principles that reflected their identities. My own methodology was about finding strategies to embody my understanding and develop my capacity to speak through dance. As a woman in the male-dominated realm of African contemporary dance, Acogny in particular could have chosen to submit to conventional ideals for women in post-colonial Senegal. Women throughout West Africa are still battling socially constructed roles that discourage independence and prevent many

women from pursuing careers and higher education. The codification of her technique is evidence that she did not accept the identity prescribed by her community or by the global dance community. Had her formal dance training in classical European ballet and Martha Graham technique fully captured the essence of her self-image, then perhaps Acogny technique would never have existed. But she infused herself, her identity, into these Western styles of dance to reflect her independence and her Beninese and Senegalese heritage. Her awe-inspiring journey to self-define has opened the doors to numerous dancers of African ethnicities to empower themselves, gaining access to formal dance training where there might not have otherwise been an opportunity, first at Mudra Afrique (as Artistic Director) and now at L'Ecole des Sables. Indeed, my first lessons with Acogny proved to me that my quest for self-definition was not only possible, but necessary. She accomplished her goals against more odds than I have faced, and her work gave me a chance to study a contemporary dance form in depth that did not force my body into painful positions or force me to attain a particular visual aesthetic. Instead her technique is rooted in somatic (mind-body integrated) practices that allowed my inner

awareness to be my principal reference point, which was the first step for me in learning how to move beyond my own boundaries.

As I worked through the process of empowerment, I realized that my predecessors all used dance as a vehicle to search for their own identities. The dances they created and techniques they developed reflected their own journeys to embody the visions they perceived for themselves. These women distinguished themselves in spite of opposition, and created strategies to communicate their individuality in dance. I was interested in how Pearl Primus's movement style spoke of her African heritage even though she was raised in the United States. Richard C. Green, scholar in African American performance studies, noted that Primus was renamed Omowale (child has returned home) by a Yoruba spiritual leader in Nigeria, and was frequently recognized throughout Africa as kin by her movement style (Green 120). This told me that her dancing was a physical manifestation of some inner process; somehow, she had found a way to embody her personal beliefs about who she was. In her quest for identity, she did not "conform to a theatrical convention that privileged first and foremost white women and then [biracial women]" (Green 123). Primus did not bend; after her

renaming in Nigeria she deliberately focused her career on the re-staging of African dances. This was a bold choice during a time when African Americans were fighting racist oppression, working hard to push American society beyond the mainstream idea that all things African were primitive and savage. Yet Primus proudly asserted her identity as a descendant of Africa and offered her dance work as a service to its people, whose nations also strove to articulate modern cultural identities in the early phases of postcolonial uphill struggles (Green 120).

Primus used dance as a vehicle of self-expression, which was one of the central aims of this research project. Prior to her decision to focus solely on the dances of Africa, Primus danced a social commentary on the inhumanity of lynching in the American south with her famous solo, *Strange Fruit* (Emery 263). In fact, she produced several thought-provoking dance works designed to draw attention to injustices in the lives of African Americans, including *Slave Market* and *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* (Emery 263). Although the work of Katherine Dunham was primarily oriented toward the concert stage and Hollywood audiences, her composition, *Southland*, also spoke out about the unjust practice of

lynching (Aschenbrenner 149). Dunham's relationship with Haiti and Primus's relationship with Liberia were part of a growing interaction of African Americans with other parts of the African diaspora. The boldness and innovation of their work influenced the black arts movement of the sixties, and they continued to uplift oppressed African American communities through dance education. The recurrent themes in my research regarding these pioneers of African and African-derived dance were empowerment of self and community, quests for identity and finding strategies to embody one's chosen identity. In the work of Primus, Acogny and Dunham, I found kindred spirits in my own journey to self-define through dance.

A current American researcher in the area of African dance re-contextualization is Kariamuw Welsh Asante<sup>11</sup>. Asante is the creator of Mfundulai, a dance technique based on what she has dubbed universal African movement (Welsh Asante 72). Asante has created a structure designed to facilitate understanding the aesthetic qualities of dances of Africa, and defined seven common categories of aesthetic quality as 'senses'. They are polyrhythm,

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix A for biographical information.

polycentrism, curvilinear, dimensional, epic memory, repetition, and holism (Welsh Asante 74). Asante is the founding artistic director of the National Dance Company of Zimbabwe and has published several works relating to her research in Africa. Her book, African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry, is one of the foundational texts in scholarship relating to dances of Africa, and I am grateful to have her work as a reference for my research. Although my knowledge of her creative work and Mfundulai is limited, I recognize that through her scholarship and dance education, Asante continues to create avenues for aspiring choreographers to investigate personal applications of dances of Africa.

#### Some notes about dance in West Africa

For this research project, I retrieved information from various sources of scholarship relating to West African dance theory, as there are few well-researched books dedicated solely to the topic. In an interview with New York Times writer Alastair Macaulay, ethnomusicologist Doris Green<sup>12</sup> asserts that many African languages have no single word for dance (Macaulay, “So, You Think

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix A for biographical information.

It's African Dance?"). The words that define movement to music as dance all come from the languages of the colonizers of African countries. As creator of the Greenotation system notating African music aligned with dance in a single score, Green further explains that what outsiders call dance is an automatic part of ceremony and social function throughout Africa (Macaulay, "So, You Think It's African Dance?"). Similarly, Germaine Acogny explains in her book, Danse Africaine, that dance in West Africa is a function of society and takes place on certain occasions, at specified times and for purposes clearly defined (12). Every dance marks some occasion: vocation, rites of passage, season changes, manifestations of collective rejoicing, etc., that is culturally and context specific. Pearl Primus also noted that dance in West Africa is an expression of every conceivable emotion or event occurring in the lives of the people. "The result is a hypnotic marriage between life and dance, an inseparable unity that manifests in dance for puberty rites, hunting, warfare, marriage and play" (Primus 6).

#### Community Embeddedness of Dance in West Africa

Dances of West Africa reflect a synthesis of movement and intention, which function as a method of socialization and



enculturation. Acogny wrote that dance in West Africa was historically a form of communication, a means of writing and of inscribing concepts into time and space (11). Similarly, Primus asserted that more than just a combination of steps or movements, these dance have an urgency: the purpose is to communicate (Primus 5). This is why traditional-based dances involve the elders of a community, upon whose shoulders rest the duty to impart wisdom to those surviving them and thereby enrich future generations. Camara, my elder, selflessly dedicated himself to my personal elevation and shared with me a wealth of information about the socio-cultural functions of each dance I studied while in Mali. He showed me that it is through dance that the elders can instruct the young and strengthen the community through tradition.

For example, Kote is a Bamana dance that is performed for several purposes depending on the village where it occurs. In some villages, newly circumcised young men dance Kote as a part of initiation rites—under the careful guidance of their elders, Kote teaches them endurance. The message of Kote is to never surrender. Like the snail for which the dance is named, Kote

teaches the youth to go slowly but surely through life. The symbolism of the circle in West African societies is well demonstrated by Kote dance, which is danced in some villages by all the members of the community. People arrange themselves in concentric circles surrounding the drummers and singers, with the youngest generation forming the innermost circle, the next generation forming a second circle, the third forming a circle around the second, and so on until the oldest members of the community form the outermost circle. The circle in West African-based dances symbolizes unity, and in the case of Kote, it symbolizes longevity of the community and the structure of the village, from the highest ranked (the elders) to the lowest.

Another of my elders, Germaine Acogny, further deepened my awareness of the power of the circle. Much of our dance and energy work occurred in a circle formation. Acogny often reminded us students that we were a community, but that we were individuals first who collectively functioned as a community. The circle was a living thing that harvested the energy of the group, and was a place where an exchange of energy occurred. The movements and rhythm gave energy to the dancers, the dancers

gave energy to the musicians and community, the community gave energy to the dancers and musicians, the music gave energy to the community and so on. Any spectators felt the energy and responded physically and verbally with calling, clapping and dancing.

In my research and processes of creative empowerment, I searched for strategies to physically express an internal presence or energy. The energy exchange that occurs in West African-based dances is a tangible experience, and the setting in which it occurs aids this exchange of energy. Energy permeates dances of West Africa and resonates with the body and the environment. As all of my mentors said repeatedly over the years, there is a special relationship with the earth that is built on the concept that energy comes from the ground. Dances like Kasa<sup>13</sup>, practiced in the Casamance region of Senegal, embody this concept through tapping and stomping on the ground. To tap the ground is to invoke the ancestors, who are buried in the earth. Stomping gestures in Kasa also represent fertility of the ground, as in planting

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<sup>13</sup> Kasa is the name of a specific dance form that is practiced in the Casamance region of Senegal. Spelling may differ in other parts of West Africa where the dance is practiced, and may also vary according to Western interpretations.

and harvest time when the earth gives birth to new life. As such, West African-based dances are often danced with bent knees and a forward incline of the upper body to bring it closer to the earth. The meanings and symbolism found in many dances of West Africa are directly connected to the communication of an idea or an invocation of energy.

### Toolbox

As dance cultures migrate to different contexts, there is often a loss of connection between the movements and the new context, and therefore the energy exchange that is critical to West African-based dances does not occur. Dance educator Abubakr Diarra talks about the energy of West African-based dances in an interview with Dr. Mark Sunkett<sup>14</sup>, scholar of African music forms and percussion; “When I’m dancing, it’s my soul that I share, or a part of it...so that when I’m dancing you feel it. That’s very necessary in African movement” (Sunkett 113). This is the challenge of re-contextualization, based on my experience studying and performing West African-based dances, and later attempting to use elements of these dances to express my own creative ideas.

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendix A for biographical information.

Germaine Acogny also addressed this challenge with students during our course in Acogny technique—we were often reminded that we had to negotiate the energy of the dance forms that we used as a basis for personal expression. When elements of West African-based dances are expressed in their new contexts, the dance must adapt, and this involved a deeper level of analysis. We were encouraged to look for an inner awareness of the movements that comprised a particular dance or sequence, as opposed to exploring a dance only from its kinesthetic and structural qualities. During this research project I found that this deeper level of inquiry was central to my investigation of Sandia.

By the time I attended my first workshop at L'Ecole des Sables, I had developed a general awareness of the field of work often described as contemporary African dance. I became a student of several choreographers of African ethnicities who have created their own strategies to re-contextualize their vernacular dance practices. There were various methods, and not everyone chose to utilize a somatic approach. For instance, some artists simply introduced West African-based dance vocabulary and rhythms into a piece of theatre or contemporary dance work—but to me this was

only a surface level of exploration. During a contemporary dance class I took with a choreographer from Burkina Faso, the choreographer explained that she created phrases using whatever movements feel right at the time. Later, she might rework the phrases into choreography, but she stressed that it was important to let the movements and energy flow. Patrick Acogny, a dance researcher and choreographer based in France, shared with us that he introduced vocabularies of various West African-based dances into his contemporary work to give the feeling of pulsation, or when he felt the work needed repetitive or constant movement. During one of the workshops I attended at L'Ecole des Sables, Patrick Acogny led our group in the deconstruction method of re-contextualizing African-based dances. This involved identifying theories operating within the movements that comprised a specific African dance vocabulary, and considering the history and purpose of the dance. By removing repetition from a series of dance steps to identify the basic movements that make up the dance, it was possible to connect these foundational movements into a phrase. This phrase could then be reworked to add transitions and intention to the movements. In this research project, I ultimately found more

holistic ways of investigating Sandia that initially involved the deconstruction method.

### Acogny Technique, Energy and Breath

Choreography tools like those used by Patrick Acogny were helpful in my process of self-definition and re-contextualization, but the technique of Germaine Acogny created the foundation for Movement to Meaning. Since the 1960s, Acogny has developed a technique that brings together elements of selected dances of West Africa, ballet and modern dance to embody her interpretation of the energies found in nature. By using movement principles common to dances of West Africa (undulation, contraction and tremulation<sup>15</sup> or vibration), Acogny has found a way to re-contextualize elements of some West African-based dances—while also respecting the energy of the dances. Acogny technique maintains a strong connection to the natural environment, and the energy exchange that is so crucial to dances of West Africa also occurs in Acogny technique. As Acogny would admonish us during

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<sup>15</sup> Tremulation is a word used by Leopold Sedar Senghor to describe a movement common to many dances of West Africa and that is also a part of Acogny technique. There is no exact English equivalent—vibration is the closest meaning.

instruction, if there is no energy in the movement, then there is nothing in the movement. To fully understand and execute Acogny technique, one must first access the energy she has worked hard to translate into movement. Below is an excerpt from my journal on the first day of my training in Acogny technique, where I describe this process of accessing (or taking) the energy:

Every morning we gather in the large space called Aloopho that overlooks the lagoon and the Atlantic ocean just beyond the lagoon. There are about 65 to 70 professional dancers and musicians including the Jant-Bi dancers. Maybe 65. We gather in one large circle. We are told to stand so that the sides of our feet touch. We grasp hands and are told to close our eyes to become centered. Told to breathe a few times. Then we are asked to really see each person in the circle. To give energy to each person in the circle. Once that is done, we close our eyes and 'take the energy' into ourselves. We then kneel and place our hands lightly on the sand to greet the sand/greet the earth/greet the soil/ greet the ancestors. With arms up, we then greet the sky. Alternatively, we will stand in the circle and we close our eyes. Starting from the leader of the group, one person sends energy into the person to their right by squeezing their hand. That person feels the energy go through them and transfers it to the person to their right by squeezing their hand. Eventually the energy runs throughout the entire circle and goes back to the leader.



Similar in this regard to traditional-based dances, Acogny technique embodies symbolism and meaning that go beyond physical movement. This is a result of years of searching to find relevance of African dances in the context of her contemporary dance technique. The spine, which represents the tree of life, is the basis of Acogny technique. For example, first position Acogny causes the dancer to place the feet in Western ballet first position and the body well-rooted in the ground (like a tree's roots). The chest is pulled up to the sky, the pelvis is pulled down by the earth and there is a strong verticality in the body, like a tree trunk or even a cross. The pelvis is also a symbol of the creative aspect of the universe—procreation. Energy always comes from the ground and resonates with the body, and this concept is also present in many dances of West Africa. Acogny teaches that the movement of the pelvis resonates constantly with the energy of the earth. In addition, the symbolism of the body in Acogny technique represents an internal manifestation of the cosmos; for example, the chest is referred to as the sun and the buttocks is the moon. This technique utilizes various principles and aestheticism found in

dances of West Africa, such as dance techniques, polyrhythm and polymovement. The forward tilt of the upper body is also manipulated through three standing positions: 1<sup>st</sup> position is vertical (180 degrees, verticality of the sky to the earth), 2<sup>nd</sup> position brings the navel closer to the earth (30 degrees), 3<sup>rd</sup> position is lower (45 degrees), and the 4<sup>th</sup> position has a 90 degree angle of the back with knees bent.

There are very specific relationships between the movements in Acogny technique and the energy I feel in my body when I execute each movement. Details of foot placement and arm placement in the barre exercises are also a question of energy. For example; during the tendu phase of le palmier (the palm tree), I do not feel the same energy in my arms if I do not mentally press energy down my shoulders through my arms and into the ground. There would be no energy moving through my arms, and therefore the movement would feel differently in my body. During the first workshop for the transmission of Acogny technique, it was only after I began to sense the energy within each movement that I felt physical changes begin to take effect in my body. I found that it was impossible to truly grasp the undulations, contractions and

tremulations without understanding where the energy comes from in each movement—although energy initially comes from the ground, it travels through the pelvis, abdominals and solar plexus to flow through the arms, legs, neck and head. I began to experience how each movement feels energetically as well as kinetically. For example, when executing le dromadaire<sup>16</sup> (the camel) if I place the hands too far above the knee, I feel a different energy in my arms and my chest than if I place the hands directly above the knee. In this way, the technique caused my body to connect with a specific energy each time I performed that movement. I was careful to look for a similar energetic awareness during my exploration of Sandia.

#### Creative Inspiration—The Present Touches the Past

While in Senegal for the transmission workshop, I connected with another energy much more profound than any written representation I had previously read. We took a group trip to Ile de Gorée (Gorée Island), Senegal, which was a holding facility for enslaved Africans during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Upon our

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<sup>16</sup> Detailed descriptions for specific barre exercises of Acogny technique, including photographs, can be found in Danse Africaine, Afrikanischer Tanz, African Dance by Germaine Acogny.

arrival to the island fort located a few kilometers off the coast of Senegal, I was already familiar with the role of the island in the Middle Passage from my undergraduate studies. Gorée was the last stop for millions of Africans en route to the Americas, where the unfortunate individuals were traded for sugar, guns, textiles and a number of items unworthy of exchange for human life and forced servitude. The soon to be displaced Africans were forcibly held in cramped cells in Gorée's slave houses for up to three months, enduring unspeakable horrors, illness, abuse and living conditions prior to being shipped off to a new land thousands of miles away from their homes. I had read the books and even written about the experience while earning my bachelor's degree in African American Studies. But I was not prepared for the emotional reaction I had when I entered the slave house that is now a working museum for visitors to the island.

One year later, it is still difficult for me to find words to describe what I felt during that visit. It was such an intense experience for me. I remember walking into the main slave house on the island and immediately feeling an immense weight, a heaviness in my spirit. Our guide, with great respect for the subject matter,

explained in great depth how the enslaved were separated according to age, gender, physical capacity to work, illness and submissiveness. He explained the actions taken by the French masters of the house against any enslaved person who tried to resist captivity. Our guide pointed out how comfortably the French family lived upstairs, high above the hellish existence of the captives in the holding cells on the first floor. I remember wandering away from the group and entering the first holding cell to the left of the entrance, marked 'Femmes'. My eyes fixed upon the tiny window inside the cell and my hands traced the ridges and markings on the wall as if they had a mind of their own. I touched the past, absorbed mentally, physically and energetically a structure left behind that directly impacted my lineage and that of my sisters and brothers descended from these African ancestors. From that moment on, I was a separate entity from the group. Tears began to pour from my eyes and would not cease until we left the building an hour later. I did not speak for three hours, and the group seemed to understand without me having to explain.

I had found my personal relevancy. From that moment on, I knew how any African movement form could be relevant to me—for

me it is a connection brought about by blood memories, a family lineage that connects me to the continent. This is my personal connection, and I let go of the need to justify why I could start with a Bamana or Wolof or Malinke dance to express myself. Somehow I felt that these memories were always with me in my spirit, and learning a body of dance vocabulary from someone who grew up on the continent was simply a practical activity that brought my blood memories to the surface. Even my research and discourse about re-contextualization seemed to be a matter of formality, since I realized at Gorée that all the knowledge I needed was already there in my spirit.

As a descendant of displaced Africans, I knew that at least one of my ancestors passed through a place like the slave house at Gorée, even though it is nearly impossible to trace exactly which (there were other holding facilities on the western coasts of Africa). All my life, especially during my undergraduate studies, I was quite aware that I am a descendant of enslaved individuals. But visiting the slave house brought me face to face with a reality that was extremely difficult to mentally grasp. I could not imagine the horrors experienced by people that I call my own, and moreover I

could not imagine having the courage to live through any of it. I live today because someone survived the unimaginable experience of the Middle Passage. I walked away from this experience with an indescribably deep sense of compassion for my ancestors and for their descendants who may never feel as rooted as I do—as connected to their personal lineage—and who might never feel the strength that comes from knowing who you are. I was so inspired and emotionally moved that I knew I had to dance about it.

While contemplating themes to build upon for this research project, I recalled Sandia, which I danced for years with Ezibu and in which I later received training during my studies in Bamako, Mali. Sandia is the dance and music of the jeliya, and even though it may be danced by non-jeliya, there are movements that are sacred only to jeliya. Jeliya<sup>17</sup> are also known as griots, as griot is a word imposed on West African societies by French colonizers in reference to the oral historians, musicians, linguists, teachers and royal spokespeople that have historically been indispensable in Mande societies. I reviewed my notes about the installment of the new

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<sup>17</sup> Various West African ethnic groups refer to their castes of oral historians in their indigenous languages.

chief of jeliya in Kita village. Arranged in a huge circle, the jeliya danced Sandia for one of the most honorable occasions in Bamana society, and they moved with pride and dignity as they honored the past and perpetuated a legacy for the current generation.

The history of many West African societies has been preserved for centuries through their jeliya lineages, as the histories of many societies were not written until the last century. I felt a symbolism between the jeliya and Gorée Island. Gorée Island and other slave forts were our ancestors' points of departure from Africa, and these holding facilities represent the break in our ability to fully trace our lineage, and know the exact history of our families. For African Americans specifically, we are lucky if we can trace our family lineages into the era of American slavery—and that was less than 200 years ago. Many of us cannot even trace our ancestry back even four generations because of poor documentation.

Similarly, I perceived that the death of a jeliya represents the loss of a vast amount of historical knowledge. These musings were triggered by our guide at Gorée who taught us that jeliya were often buried inside hollow baobab trees in Senegal. We were told that because they had not worked the land (their vocations are



related to their roles in society as oral historians and musicians), they could not be buried in the land. I felt deeply that we African Americans are like a tree cut off from its roots. Gorée and other slave forts represented to me the places where the wound was inflicted upon our ancestral heritage; they were the places of our uprooting before being transplanted to America. I decided to explore Sandia in contemplation of this metaphor, hoping to somehow share even a small portion of what I felt at the slave house and help others find connection and healing through creative inquiry.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

During my last visit to L'Ecole des Sables, something occurred to me that deeply impacted my approach to making work. Dances of West Africa, although constantly changing as a reflection of contemporary societies, have evolved over the course of centuries. The meanings and symbolism expressed in these dances have evolved and continue to evolve since their creation. While working to re-contextualize Sandia for performance in my applied MFA project, I needed to take time and search for meanings in the movements that could be relevant to my experience at Gorée. So I began to develop Movement to Meaning in order to facilitate this investigation.

#### Movement to Meaning

The components of Movement to Meaning were energy work, meditation and investigation of meaning. For purposes of clarity, in this research project I used the term 'take the energy' or 'taking the energy' to refer to the process of energy sharing derived from

Acogny technique.<sup>18</sup> I used the term ‘energy work’ to refer to the combined processes of taking the energy and breathing exercises derived from my meditation practices. I also referred to movement being ‘authentic’, which in this study I used to refer to movement that was a direct expression of emotional or energetic impulses—movement that happened as a reaction to a specific emotion or thought, that was not pre-calculated or designed, and which emerged in the setting we established as safe and free of judgment.

Similar to Acogny technique, the method began with forming a circle, taking the energy of the natural environment and exchanging energy with the other dancers in the circle. Walking meditation and breathing exercises followed to connect the dancers to each other and to further connect the dancers to the soil or the ground supporting our feet. I incorporated imagery into the walking meditations to aid this connection and establish calm in the minds and bodies of the dancers. For example, I suggested that energy was traveling up the body through the feet and out of the crown of

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<sup>18</sup> See page 34 of this document for my personal account of taking the energy in Acogny technique.

the head during each inhale, and that it poured down through the head and out of the body through the feet during each exhale. In Acogny technique, breath flow is linked to every movement and I hoped that bringing this practice into our work would aid our process in co-creating the dance. Through breathing, dancers would hopefully release energy into the movement and into the environment, and also receive energy from the ground, the environment and each other. Deepak Chopra, M.D.<sup>19</sup>, motivational speaker and spiritual guide whose work has helped shaped my meditative practices, teaches that the breath is intimately associated with the life force (referred to as prana in yoga), the vital energy that is the primary creative power of the cosmos (Chopra 100). I was looking for an energy exchange facilitated through use of the breath. After the energy work, we warmed up and began the meditation and the investigation of meaning exercises. Guided meditation exercises were designed to help dancers alternate placing their focused attention on a specific object, idea or movement and then releasing that attention completely. This method of focused and open awareness was

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<sup>19</sup> See Appendix A for biographical information.

designed to free the mind and body to be sensitive to the creative process, and could also help dancers feel more receptive to the energy, sensations and intention they might feel while working. This exercise was also used to help facilitate a connection between the dancers and the concepts of displacement, slavery and Gorée Island.

All of the energy work was done in complete silence. Working within this framework of mental calm and open awareness, the dancers began an individual search for meaning within a selected Sandia dance vocabulary. Dancers were encouraged to use choreography tools, such as deconstruction, to isolate the basic movements that comprised the movement phrases. While executing the individual movements, I asked the dancers to notice what they felt in their bodies—perhaps some intention implied by a particular gesture or action—and explore through movement whatever emotions or thoughts came to mind. After focusing and releasing their attention on a concept, they may have felt some intention implied by the movements in relationship to the idea. The purpose of this exploration was not only for dancers to find meaning and intention within the Sandia dance vocabulary, but to also use the

vocabulary as a starting point to create movements that were personally relevant to the dancers. Dancers could periodically return to walking meditations and breathing exercises throughout the process of inquiry in order to maintain a connection with their breathing, the energy of the environment and the concepts being explored. Imagery was introduced into the process to guide their search for and evolution of the creative process. Equally important in this development was the element of play. Dancers were free to play with any aspect of the movements (music, rhythm, tempo, repetition, etc.) to see how the manipulation of these elements may impact any intention that could be implied by a movement. I kept a detailed journal and remained in communication with dancers throughout the process.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS

We began working in May 2010, and by the first week in July we created an initial draft of the choreography. The final cast consisted of three African American women ranging in age from 20 to 22. They were all undergraduate dance majors with years of training in ballet and more recently American postmodern contemporary dance. Our creative process began by getting acquainted with the subject matter—I asked the dancers how much they knew about the slave trade overall and what they felt when they thought about it. We discussed how we felt about our shared heritage as displaced descendants of enslaved Africans. This seemed to establish a mental framework for the theme of the work and helped us explore our own feelings coming into the process. After several lengthy initial conversations about my motivation for the work and my experience at Gorée Island (at the dancers' request), I asked the dancers to watch a video explaining Gorée Island's role in the transatlantic slave trade, and each dancer wrote a list of words relating to their personal reactions to the video. We moved into more personal work by journaling about our oldest

known relatives (mostly our grandparents) and calling up memories and stories shared with us by the elders of our families. This work was all personal, and dancers were not asked to divulge any of their thoughts unless they so desired. Interestingly, there were times when they spoke openly about their feelings, and other times when speech threatened to reveal their tears, so silence was chosen as a safety net. It felt satisfying to see how connected the dancers said they were to the subject matter of the piece, and how passionate they were about dancing a work that directly related to their ancestry. After the second session, we began the energy work, investigation of meaning exercises and the physical dance training required to re-contextualize Sandia.

Our physical training involved my teaching the dancers selected movements from Acogny technique to help acclimate their bodies with the physical techniques of Sandia. Some of the fundamental movement principles operating within Sandia are undulation, fluidity of movement (particularly in the arms and back) and a certain effortless quality of carrying the body through space, especially when jumping. I first taught the dancers the entire Acogny warm up sequence, which is always done in a circle and



harvests the energy of the group. I then taught the dancers L'Arc Bandé (the bowed arc), Contraction Haute et Relâchement (upper contraction and release) and Le Fromager (the kapok tree). In addition to warm up and standing barre exercises, I taught the dancers across the floor combinations built on movements from Acogny technique. This part of our training was done over the course of about six or seven weeks, and we focused on just a few movements at a time. The remainder of the physical training involved my teaching a set of seven short movement phrases based on Sandia traditional-based dance.

Some of our work in Acogny technique evolved into movements, which became symbolic motifs in the choreographed dance work. In addition, the practice of breath/movement connection, inspired by Acogny technique, became an inseparable part of the piece. I found that the energy work was equally as important as the dancing. It established a calm, introspective and creative space and I learned that we simply could not leave it out. Each of the dancers agreed that the breathing exercises channeled their energy into a calm, quiet space and made it easier for them to explore their emotions. There were a couple of times during

rehearsals when we inadvertently jumped into the physical work without taking the energy or doing any breathing exercises, and the dancing that occurred felt disconnected and sometimes artificially imposed on our bodies. When we deliberately breathed into the dance, it gave life and energy to our movements.

The consequences of breathing and reaching into an inner space together established a collective energy field that united us beyond the physical acting of dancing. During individual improvisations, similar movements appeared in the work of dancers who worked in different locations. Similarities in thought emerged in the journaling we shared with one another, when two or more of us used similar words to describe our movements and personal reactions. At times dancers intuitively moved in sync without being asked to do so, and dancers began to find the same rhythm of breathing while executing phrases together. Truly, this dance work became a function of the community we had built through shared understanding, shared goals and most of all through energy work. This was apparent when a dancer was occasionally absent from rehearsal—we felt the absence of that individual, as my dancers commented, and I personally felt somewhat unbalanced because we

lacked the energy of that dancer. A community feeling quickly developed among us as we worked in this holistic manner.

The bulk of our physical training was actually spent working through the Sandia dance vocabulary. Starting from scratch with this dance was time consuming. Because the dancers had very little or no exposure to this dance form or West African-based dances at all, I spent a lot of time in the beginning teaching techniques related to the form so we could use it as a place from which to grow. I had hoped that this process would not be lengthy, and I ultimately decided to simplify the phrases to make it easier to master. I found that in working with dancers who had not been trained in West African-based dances, I had to give them all the percussive movements that I hoped could be manipulated and personalized to each dancer to highlight polyrhythms on the body. I had to eventually relinquish this vision of musicality to our musicians who joined us later in the process. But even more than this, the dancers were not readily available to express themselves through movement. For all their physical dance training, we had to work hard to find ways for the dancers to express themselves—and we later found a breakthrough with our investigation of meaning

exercises. This was limiting and at times frustrating to me because the dance work was about personal expression, and I had envisioned the dancers' personalities and unique relationships to movement eagerly coming forward. At any rate, the dancers were beautifully pliant and dedicated on a deeper level to the work, and I was grateful for each moment with them.

The movement vocabulary for the choreographed dance was born of our investigation of meaning exercises. The first investigation of meaning was a movement session where I witnessed each dancer independently explore their reactions to a collage of photos of the slave house at Gorée. We established a spatial arrangement in which I served as witness to their process of connecting and moving authentically. Each dancer and I worked alone in the silent studio and I sat off to the side of the dancer so that I was barely visible to the dancer peripherally. I asked the dancer to place her attention on the collage of Gorée photos. Then the only suggestion I made to the dancer was, 'Feel.' The dancer moved as she was motivated by the pictures to do so, and often used verbal expression to embody what she felt. After about 15 minutes, I began to gently ask the dancer to pause during their

process and repeat certain movements. Together we constructed phrases from these authentic responses to what Gorée Island represented for them. This exercise was, in my opinion, one of the most productive exercises in the early part of our process. The movements that emerged were authentic and offered without regard for technical precision or aesthetic beauty. This was the first time I saw a hint of the dancers' personal connection to the theme of the work beginning to shine through their dancing.

Another investigation of meaning exercise was focused on the Sandia movements we learned. In this exercise, we tried to feel if simply executing a movement could imply any intention. If we did not sense any symbolism in a particular movement, we moved on to the next Sandia step. We engaged in this exercise as a group, but we investigated meaning within the movements independently and were free to proceed through the set of movement vocabulary on our own timing. This exercise was a personal interpretation of what can be implied by the movement. We first explored this exercise on its own, and in a subsequent session I introduced a context within which to explore the Sandia vocabulary. As we worked individually, I suggested that we look for any connections between their

recollection of their word lists and any symbolism they might find within the Sandia movements. I rhetorically asked questions like, “Can you find any of your words in these movements?” “What do you feel when you do this movement?” “Can you identify a feeling or idea that comes to mind when you perform this movement?” We later applied a similar process to sections of the choreographed dance to which we needed to mentally connect.

Once we had some phrases to work with, the process of finding a mind-body-spirit connection to the movement was a challenging one. I found this challenge to be present throughout the creation of the dance work—and it was confusing for me because the phrases were created from the dancers’ own authentic responses to the subject matter. I could understand this difficulty early in the process. Based on my experience, I know it can be difficult to embody intention while executing material that is new to the body and mind. I have taken classes that left my mind so busy trying to remember and organize movement that I would not be present mentally. I asked my dancers why they still struggled to find a mind-body-spirit connection long after they were accustomed to the movement material. My dancers responded that they were

not trained to emote through dance. In fact, all three dancers commented that this kind of deliberate, methodical approach to connecting inner processes to their movement was a brand new experience for them. It was an interesting experience for me because I had never encountered this challenge when I taught dances of West Africa. Additionally, as a student I always learned the symbolism and purpose of dances of African origin while learning the movement material. Therefore, I was always aware of the intention behind the dance and could embody the intention even while learning. It took a long time for this freedom of expression to become apparent in the dancers' execution of the choreography. In fact, I realized that I should continue to cultivate this attitude of freedom in my personal dance practice. I come from a background of always engaging in the creative process with a goal in mind, instead of giving myself the freedom to dance or play what I feel.

When we crafted the first draft of the choreography, the dancing appeared to be unnatural—as though the dancers were simply repeating movements they were told to execute. So we kept working to find meaning. At one point early in the process, we even

sat in a circle and discussed our individual interpretations of the meanings of every phrase we had so far. Eventually, the dancers were able to work more thoroughly through the Sandia dance material and find ways to own the movements that emerged. It seemed that they found a way to speak through the movements that felt authentic, as opposed to appearing unnatural and imposed onto the dancers' bodies. But it was only with continued and repeated energy work and relating the energy work to the movements that the ownership of the movements came. The final dance work presented a variety of voices that were truly unique even though we started with the same material.

The way we found ownership of the dance was through one of our last investigation of meaning exercises, which I adapted from an activity I learned in a theatre class. I asked the dancers to work independently, taking one of their phrases and talking themselves through it while dancing. This involved dancers first contemplating what the movements or the phrase as a whole represented to them. The dancers then created highly dramatized versions of the dance phrases, vocally expressing the intention behind the movements while executing the dance. I asked them to give me



over the top, wildly expressive verbal and physical expression, which was something that we had never played with before. The only requirement was that dancers be as dramatic as possible. I asked them to give themselves total freedom over the phrases; if they need to move a certain way to express what they felt then they should disregard the choreography for that moment. Then I left the room, and two dancers also relocated so everyone could work in complete privacy. We reconvened in the studio space after about twenty minutes, and we shared our individual work with each other. The dancers showed the phrases that had emerged from this exploration with the dramatic interpretation first. Then the dancers removed the vocal expressions to their discretion and danced the movements with the same intention and energy. This was the most amazing and profound experience of all the work we had done trying to connect mind to body. The dancers were completely engaged in the process—I had never seen any of the dancers relate to movement in such a powerful way. One of the dancers even commented that without this exercise, she would not have found the deep connection to the work that she ultimately embraced. What emerged was emotionally moving to the point of tears and

deeply impactful. As an observer I could feel dancers release emotions through their movement and vocal expressions, and one dancer commented that the entire exercise was an immense release of energy for her. We rearranged and redeveloped the phrases, and found the wonderful gift of connecting not only to the movement but also to one another. Most profoundly, the energy of that experience became a permanent fixture in the dance work.

Intermittently in the process of creating and then performing the work, I pulled myself out of the dance to observe. Sometimes I tried to sense if there was a flow of energy or momentum building in the dance. The dance work definitely took on a life of its own—movements evolved from one expression into new expressions and once the work came to life, its energy was also something that had to be negotiated. Similar to my experience performing dances from West Africa, there were moments in creating and performing this dance work when we felt the momentum take over the space and our bodies, and we discussed it afterwards. The best way I can describe it is that I could feel a surge of energy moving through the space and supporting our dancing. This was always after an unhurried session of energy work and breathing. Sometimes the

energy came during the Sandia practice, which frequently involved jazz, neo-soul, zouk or popular Malian music as accompaniment. Later in the process, the energy came during rehearsals with our musicians—when they found a dialogue with us, the dance took on a life of its own and we were carried on its energy. Our performances were strong and impacted both the cast and audience. Several audience members mentioned how emotionally moved they were by the dance, and we all had emotional moments during the performances. Interestingly, a dancer mentioned that some moments of her performance were so emotionally intense that she had to breathe; she did not understand why, but her impulse was to breathe through the emotion.

While planning the choreography and production elements, I considered the costumes typically worn when Sandia is danced by the jeliya in its socio-cultural setting. The costume is a billowy grande boubou, which is commonly worn in Islamic societies. It is also a functional part of the dance, because the movement of the arms must negotiate the large amount of fabric that drapes from the arms. I chose costumes that represented our interpretation of the dance, and I did not see a need to adhere to any other

elements of Sandia dance other than starting with the movements as a base. We had several musicians join us during the latter half of creating the piece, and they played music that in many ways supported the feel of our dancing. In addition, the musicians designed a polyrhythmic score for what could be perceived as the climax of the piece. We had trumpet, electric bass, kalimba, congas, a rain stick and various hand percussions. Live music being played on several instruments gave new energy to the dance work that intensified its aesthetic value and meaning.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### Discussion

The most significant outcome of working in this manner is that I realized very early in the process that my journey was not about studying a dance form. When I began my graduate studies, I thought re-contextualization was about translating one form of dance into another; in my case, West African dance forms into postmodern contemporary dance. But a dance form is an outward expression of an inner process of understanding, regardless of which category of dance it may resemble. I learned that creating a new context within which to explore a West African dance involves a deeper level of investigation, by first contemplating the meaning and symbolism of the dance and then allowing the inner awareness to communicate through movement. I no longer attempt to fit my personal expression into one category of dance practices or another, because dance is about self-expression and communication of intention. This research project has demonstrated that in order to re-contextualize a West African dance (or any dance practice), the resulting physical aspects of the new dance should reflect the

intention of the mover. This may result in movement that does not resemble the original dance that served as a basis for evolution. In fact, it is not about the movement at all.

My journey was about expressing intention beyond choreography, be it a specific dance form or a choreographed sequence of any kind of movement. This also related to my first draft of the choreography, which consisted of movements that deliberately embodied an aesthetic characterized by Sandia. In choreographed West African dances, there are customary patterns of arranging phrases and typical staging formations that are often seen in West African-based dance choreography. Choreographed works often follow the low to middle to high tempo sequencing of both movement choices and flow of energy. The circle formation is very commonly used because of its deep symbolism that occurs in a large number of West African societies. Horizontal and vertical lines, u-shaped formations and diagonals are also common and occur in most of the West African-based choreography that I have seen or in which I have performed. Initially, I intentionally arranged a specific section of the choreography from this standpoint, but I later realized the need to allow these rules of structure to fall away.

This revealed possibilities for a much more creative interpretation of the style of choreography that I was accustomed to making.

Everything about this investigation led me to the realization that my work is about honoring the self, honoring the individual. It showed me that everything that I was would always be with me, regardless of whatever form I danced. It was my inner self that longed to express itself and did so without regard to dance form or even art form. Once I found ways of accessing the inner self, it poured through me into the work. My process of engaging the dancers in a holistic manner was ultimately about helping them open up to allow what they experienced inside to become manifest outside. All our challenges always came back to honoring the self. The process continued to bring me back to an internal reference point while creating the work, and this state of awareness was crucial during performance. By far, most of our time leading up to performance was spent connecting the mental and physical processes of moving. Because we did so much energy work, whenever we did not honor a very focused, unhurried energy exchange, the dance did not seem to communicate a clear intention.

What I thought was a process of adapting a dance form became an exploration of how to connect mind and body. We constantly searched and applied methods to help dancers find and maintain a connection between their mental and physical processes. I remember noticing that early in the process, the dancers felt a bit emotionally inaccessible to me and to each other. I tried to be as open as possible, but perhaps I was even a little cautious at times. Through the development of this work, bonds developed between us that gave us a sense of shared identity and mutual purpose. This aspect of community was more valuable to me than the completion or fulfillment of a creative journey. I found that working in this way also helped me to deal with the emotional impact of my visit to Gorée. Although we started with a Bamana dance, we found personal relevancy because Sandia developed into an expression of our experience as a group of American women of mixed ethnic heritage. I had not felt this connected to a group of dancers since my performances with Ezibu Muntu. That was a profound gift to me.

At the outset of this project I contemplated the question, 'What makes a dance African?' Because of this process, I feel that



this work's African-ness is its symbolism, communication, and the way the dance and music became expressions of our community's (dancers and musicians) beliefs regarding our displacement and that of our ancestors. Dance is one of the means through which individuals impart cultural wisdom and uphold beliefs and knowledge shared by community. This was at the heart of my research—how I could use movement and music to communicate ideas, to express intent.

Late into my process, somatics research revealed that one of our investigation of meaning exercises is similar to the Authentic Movement somatic exercise commonly applied to dance. Had I known about this practice at the time of our investigation, it may have changed the way we worked. Authentic Movement is an improvisational structure made up of pairs or groups of people. The roots of this practice are in the work of Mary Starks Whitehouse (1911-1978), a pioneer in the fields of dance education and dance therapy (Lowell 13). Dance therapist Janet Adler formalized the practice and gave it a name. The experience involves one person (or small group) witnessing while one person moves in a studio space (Lowell 14). The witness brings a quality of attention or

presence to the experience of the mover, not judging the mover or her actions or looking “at” the mover (Lowell 15). She simply listens. The mover, with eyes closed, responds to an inner impulse—to energy coming from the personal or collective subconscious—and what emerges is material that comes from a deeper level of the mover’s kinesthetic reality (Lowell 15). The mover and witness may discuss their observations at the conclusion of the session.

Janet Adler continued to develop the practice of Authentic Movement in conjunction with her spiritual practices. I think it is a wonderful tool for moving beyond the limits of the ego. When we remove the ego and become fully in tune with what we feel inside, we can allow that which is inside to become manifest outside. One of my dance mentors from Nigeria (which has an ancient, sophisticated tradition of theatre) told me once that in order to truly engage in performance, one must be in trance. In other words, the act of getting into character is essentially inviting the energy of the character to enter one's body, using such body as a vessel through which it can perform. With regard to both Movement to Meaning and Authentic Movement sessions, I have learned that any

time I work with my eyes closed for an extended period of time, my inner self, or my spirit, emerges into being. Whether I'm engaging in a deliberate spiritual practice or not, the very act of removing my focus from the outside world invites my spirit to come forth and act uninhibited. It's amazing how spiritual this kind of work can be. Indeed, my creative work is not separate from my life. While working on this research project of re-contextualizing Sandia, which is a dance sacred to oral historians, I was concurrently researching my family tree. I had been investigating this information for well over a year when I began exploring Sandia for my MFA project. Two or three months before the project culminated in performance, a woman who married into a cousin lineage of my father's lineage contacted me. She had been researching our family for twenty years, and shared with me a significant portion of her findings. Because of her contributions to my research, I can now trace my paternal grandmother's lineage well into the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and I have chronicled the journey some of my ancestors made from France, Ireland and England to Saint Domingue (now Haiti), then on to Louisiana. Ironically, they were involved in the triangular trade and fled Saint Domingue in the aftermath of the only successful

slave revolt led by Toussaint L'Ouverture. I am in awe of how this creative inquiry into a dance sacred to oral historians has empowered me with deeper knowledge about the history of my own family. In this way, my personal life outside of dance mirrored my creative process in dance, taking me deeper into my spiritual self and into a deeper connection with my ancestors.

### Conclusion

My journey was about a creative practice that enables the mover to dance from an internal reference point. The connection of mind, body and spirit to the external aspect of moving is the most fascinating outcome of this research project, and it has shaped my future creative practices. As I continue to investigate meaning beyond form in dance, it is vital that I allow adequate time for an unhurried, deliberate process to unfold. Our performances of *Ten For Every Thousand* were a snapshot in our collective artistic evolution, and I felt that we were just at the beginning of truly embodying the essence of the work. In the future, it would be ideal to engage in the Movement to Meaning methodology a second time after the initial draft of any resulting choreography is created. The second round of investigation might focus on the newly

choreographed work as a basis for further development, in order to further deepen the cast's somatic connection to the physical dance.

One of my goals in the development of Movement to Meaning is to offer these strategies to other emerging artists who seek to find meaning in vernacular dance languages outside of their socio-cultural settings. In fact, it is important for these emerging artists to initially develop a broad awareness of the tools created by other artists with similar questions. The ability to identify with a community of artists on a collective journey is a significant part of the process, and is a much-needed validation of one's own path to empowerment. With regard to Movement to Meaning, the presence of community is a central aspect of the energy sharing practices. Regularly entering the individual and collective field of subconscious through meditation will prompt latent emotions to emerge into creative interpretation, and participants need to feel the support of individuals with shared understanding. Depending on the work, the community that develops may include artists of various disciplines. However, it is necessary for all artists to engage in the entire process, adapting Movement to Meaning or other somatic methods

so that each person can find their individual connection to the context, and create art that communicates their understanding. In addition, it would be helpful to collaborate with artists that have prior knowledge of the aesthetic and structural elements of the source material for re-contextualization. For instance, if the source material is a dance that requires live accompaniment, then musicians should ideally have prior training and practice in the musical accompaniment to the dance—their process might involve a re-contextualization of this music. They would also need adequate preparation on how to relate their playing to the movement of the dancers.

Although Sandia was the source material for my research, the strategies offered in *Movement to Meaning* are applicable to any dance form or sequence of movement material. I plan to continue formulating this holistic creative practice for others to use, clearly articulating its design and application so that it can be easily followed. My ultimate goal is to develop these strategies into a curriculum model that can be disseminated in a classroom setting. The basic steps of the process are listed below:

## Basic Components of Movement to Meaning:

### 1. Energy Work

#### 1.A. Energy Sharing

#### 1.B. Breathing Exercises

### 2. Meditation

3. Investigation of Meaning—It is important in this step to explore layers of meaning, symbolism, structure and aesthetics. Participants should consider first the function of the dance and its historical relevancy in its original setting. Then a variety of strategies based on this methodology or others may be utilized to analyze the structural and aesthetic components of the dance. Ultimately, this step may aid the participant to find their personal connection to the dance, and embody their understanding.

I look forward to the ways in which this research will bring a deeper level of understanding of my creative work and myself. I hope that by continuing to develop Movement to Meaning, I can help other emerging artists to explore their vernacular movement forms in meaningful ways which supersede limitations, self-imposed or otherwise.

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APPENDIX A  
BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION ON SELECTED ARTISTS AND  
SCHOLARS

## Germaine Acogny

Germaine Acogny is the creator of Germaine Acogny's Modern African Dance Technique, a profound movement form that is both African and contemporary. Acogny founded her first dance studio in Dakar in 1968, and in 2004 established L'Ecole des Sables International Center for Traditional and Contemporary African Dances in Senegal, which is a place for professional education, a forum of exchange and a meeting place for dancers from Africa and across the world. In 1999, Germaine Acogny was decorated as "Pioneer Woman" by the Senegalese Ministry of the Family and the National Solidarity. She continues to develop Acogny Technique, choreograph and perform her creative work as the Artistic Director of the Senegal-based company, Jant-Bi.

## Patrick Acogny

Choreographer and dancer, Patrick Acogny worked with the Parisian company, Ebéne, directed by Irène Tassembédo of Burkina Faso, before settling in Birmingham, U.K, to direct

Kokuma Dance Theatre. Acogny directed Kokuma Dance Theatre, an African and Caribbean dance company, for six years and is presently based in Brittany, France. Acogny is regularly invited to various European and African countries to work with professionals and amateurs. Patrick is frequently a university researcher with the ethnoscenology laboratory of Paris VIII in Saint-Denis. He has recently completed a PhD on African Dance Forms.

Kariamuu Welsh Asante

Kariamuu Welsh Asante is a contemporary dance choreographer and scholar whose awards include a National Endowment for the Arts and a Guggenheim Fellowship. She is the author of numerous books including: Zimbabwe Dance: Rhythmic Forces, Ancestral Voices and An Aesthetic Analysis and Umfundalai: An African Dance Technique. She is the editor of The African Aesthetic: Keeper of Traditions, African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry, and a co-editor of African Culture: Rhythms of Unity.

Ronald K. Brown

Ronald K. Brown is artistic director of Ronald K. Brown/Evidence, the dance company he founded in 1985 at the age of 19. Brown works with movement in the postmodern, African, and African American idioms. Significantly, his work focuses on the African American experience.

Sekou Camara

Sekou Camara is an expert in Malian studies, linguist and educator. Camara has contributed to numerous publications and reference material for Oswego University, New Jersey University, Indiana University and the Smithsonian Institute, among other institutes of higher education. Camara has also contributed to numerous publications by independent researchers. His work involves the preservation of Manden cultural heritage and various efforts to promote health and welfare, building schools and establishing enterprises throughout Malian communities.

Deepak Chopra, M.D.

Deepak Chopra, M.D. is a world-renowned authority in the field of mind-body healing. Dr. Chopra is a best-selling author, having published over fourteen bestsellers on mind-body health, quantum mechanics, spirituality, and peace. Praised by *Time Magazine* as the "poet-prophet of alternative medicine," Dr. Chopra is also the host of the popular weekly Wellness Radio program on Sirius/XM Stars. Dr. Chopra is a global force in the field of human empowerment, and is the co-founder of the Chopra Center for Wellbeing. ("The Chopra Center")

Dr. Charles "Chuck" Davis (Baba Chuck)

Dr. Charles "Chuck" Davis is Founder and Artistic Director of the African American Dance Ensemble and the annual African Dance showcase, DanceAfrica, based in New York. Chuck Davis studied African dance under the guidance of Babatunde Olatunji, Eleo Pomare, and the Bernice Johnson Dance Company. He is a recipient of the NY Bessie Award and the very prestigious Brooklyn Academy of Music Award for

distinguished service. In December of 1998, he received an honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts from Medgar Evers College of NY; and another in 2005 from Williams College, Williamstown, MA. (“Chuck Davis African American Dance Ensemble”)

Katherine Dunham

Katherine Dunham was a dancer, choreographer, and educator who, in the 1930s, founded the first major African American modern dance company in the United States. Dunham’s unique blend of Afro-Caribbean, ballet, and modern dance captivated audiences around the world. Katherine Dunham Technique revolutionized American modern dance, and has since influenced the work of the most successful African American choreographers. Dunham performed and choreographed productions for Broadway and Hollywood films, as well as for dance revues that toured the world.

## Doris Green

Doris Green is a retired Fulbright scholar to Africa, certified teacher of Labanotation and U.S. State Department Cultural Specialist to Ghana. She is the creator of the Greenotation system, notating African music aligned with dance in a single score. Throughout the years, she has written many research notes and student texts such as Ngoma Sindimba film and pamphlet on the Wamakonde puberty dance. Other publications include “Percussive Notes”, The Journal of Percussive Arts Society; “The National Dance Company of Senegal”, International Encyclopedia of Dance, Oxford University Press, 1998, Volume 4; “Traditional Dance in Africa.” African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry, 1996.

## Pearl Primus

Pearl Primus was an American dancer, choreographer, anthropologist, and teacher whose performance work drew on the African American experience and on her research in Africa and the Caribbean. Primus was the first woman of



African descent to re-stage dances of African heritage on the American stage. Her original dance company eventually grew into the Pearl Primus Dance Language Institute, where her method of blending African-American, Caribbean, and African influences with modern dance and ballet techniques is taught. In 1991, President George Bush honored Primus with the National Medal of Arts.

Dr. Mark E. Sunkett

Dr. Mark E. Sunkett has been a member of the performance faculty at Arizona State University since the fall of 1976. As an ethnomusicologist Dr. Sunkett's principal areas of research are African American and African music, percussion performance practices and aesthetics. Since 1994 he has been principal investigator on the "Drums of Sénégal Project." This project seeks to document rhythms, history and performance practices among the various ethnic groups in Senegal. His publications include: 1) *Mandiani Drum and Dance: Djimbe Performance and Black Aesthetics from Africa to the New World*, White Cliffs Media; 2) The compact disk,

*Mandiani Drum and Dance*, White Cliffs Media; 3) A video tape to accompany these titles was completed in January, 1997; 4) A compact disc featuring Omar Thiam and Jam Bugum entitled, *Sabar, the Soul of Senegal*, was released in October, 1997.

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar

Born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar trained with Joseph Stevenson, a student of the legendary Katherine Dunham. After earning her B.A. in dance from the University of Missouri at Kansas City, she moved to New York City in 1980 to study with Dianne McIntyre at Sounds in Motion. Four years later, she founded Urban Bush Women (UBW) in 1984 as a performance ensemble dedicated to exploring the use of cultural expression as a catalyst for social change. Jawole received her M.F.A in dance from Florida State University and is the Nancy Smith Fichter tenured professor in FSU's Dance Department. (“Urban Bush Women: Create Dance. Create Community.”)