

**RITUALS OF RETURN IN AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S TWENTIETH
CENTURY LITERATURE AND PERFORMANCE**

by

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Rituals of Return is dedicated to Thomas, Sr. (“Pops”) and Betty (“BB”) Hardin
and all of our mothers and fathers:

George Leonard and Mollie Bell (Gatewood) Nuckols
Roosevelt and Janie (Garnett) Richardson
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PREFACE

Aunt Hester is crying

An eerie silence had fallen,
punctuated by whimpers, sobs and moans rising from the shadows.
A woman is led to a lonely and secluded spot near Folsom's Bridge.

They got Eloise.
Grief-stricken and terrified, her agony joins with her baby's two feeble
cries.

(And Aunt Hester cried too.)

Then the old woman began howling,
a mark of blood and shame which spreads
a sound that seemed to come from her very guts.

from under the magnolia trees.
Southern trees bear strange fruit.

(Aunt Hester is crying again.)

And though I have never seen a
black body swaying

from a southern tree,
I have felt these things in spirit, and the need
to show this thing to the world.

The challenge: unearthing the mislaid,
forgotten,
&/or misunderstood

Yall see how dey throw dem in de ground wit no care at all.
women writers, painters, mothers,
cowgirls, & union leaders of our pasts

Now dey come back to we!
Sixty million and more.

I'm trying to create a land for us where we can live.

This is the story of every one of them.

(Aunt Hester keeps crying.)

Come back to get de proper way from we.

Sixty million and more
Us got to put dem to right!

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ABSTRACT

Rituals of Return in African American Women's Twentieth Century Literature and Performance

by

Tayana L. Hardin

Co-Chairs: Magdalena Zaborowska and Frieda Ekotto

A substantial body of African American Studies scholarship has demonstrated how the unresolved pain, suffering, and violence of the past impacts the present, and, furthermore, how African American women writers and performers particularly have often depicted the lingering past as ghostly or ancestral figures. However, few sustained studies consider this phenomenon beyond the scope of representation. *Rituals of Return in African American Women's Twentieth Century Literature and Performance* focuses on four key twentieth century figures—Josephine Baker (1906-1975), Katherine Dunham (1909-2006), Ntozake Shange (b. 1948), and Julie Dash (b. 1952)—and probes the methodological and creative challenges that the past poses for these women whose literary, cinematic, choreographic, and dramatic works grapple with the resonances of gender, sexual, and racial violence. Using ritual, spiritual possession, divination, and the ancestral burial grounds as overarching metaphors, this dissertation argues that the creative process is a dialogic rather than oppositional interplay between the spiritual and

the political, pain and beauty, invisibility and hypervisibility, and the disembodied ancestral past and embodied temporal present.

Beginning with a close reading of Josephine Baker's conga performance in the 1935 French colonial film *Princess Tam Tam*, I demonstrate how neither the exuberance of her dancing, nor the political demands of francophone discourses of black internationalism can quiet the lingering pain of Baker's upbringing in the U.S. Midwest, or the historical, exploitative representations of black female bodies. Katherine Dunham's choreography in her 1951 Cold War era production of *Southland*, a balletic dramatization of lynching in the American South, similarly incites phenomenal reproductions of the past and its attendant pains, as well as subsequent crises in identity. In the 1975 *for colored girls*, Ntozake Shange inherits these crises and remedies them through the ritual form of the choreopoem and through a more individualized and gendered depiction of black women's lives. At the close of the twentieth century, Julie Dash's film and novel *Daughters of the Dust* illustrate how ritualizing the creative process reveals those moments when text meets performance, where the ancestral crosses the living, and where ritual affirms the fact of black humanity.

INTRODUCTION

Locating the Ancestral Burial Grounds

Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her, and even if they were, how can they call her if they don't know her name? Although she has claim, she is not claimed. In the place where long grass opens, the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easy for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away.

*It was not a story to pass on.
Toni Morrison, *Beloved*¹*

She traveled a long, long way to find them. She walked right out of the water one day, stepped full grown out of the belly of the deep. There was “nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in” (75). Rocked to and fro—“arms crossed, knees drawn up, holding, holding on” (75)—she consorted with the heaps of people down there. She couldn’t untangle a single name from among the pile of legs, arms, stench, and fluid, packed tight, front to back, side to side. She only knew that there were a lot of them in this shared abyss; some of them would not make it. And she knew too the loneliness that roamed down there, the “inside kind—wrapped tight like skin” (274). That loneliness must have been unrelenting to the extent that she had to come back to this place “where I am” already (76) and where they would be too: Sethe (the one she had to have), Denver, and Paul D. And with cutting precision, she showed up in their front yard, frail and exhausted, “sopping wet and breathing shallow” (50). Her entire body was on the brink of

collapse: her neck so fragile that it threatened to drop her head right off its post and “everything hurt but her lungs most of all” (50).

Hers was not a story to pass on.

Author Toni Morrison’s character Beloved is perhaps the most well known ghost in African-American literature. She appears of her own accord with a will to lay claim on those around her. Although she carries on with a child’s self-interest, her business in the land of the living is real, for she presses those in her household to speak her name, to appease her desires for doting, attention, and time. She is somehow old and new, knowing and innocent, eager and exacting: all of the things a living embodiment of the past would be. Moreover, she is the singular story of a universe of all of those down there, cast away and disappeared in what I call the ancestral burial grounds: the sixty million and more captured Africans—some of whom found that “one way ashore”² and the many others who were later thrown *in the ground with no care at all*³; and others who yet punctuate the lowest depths of the sea with balls and chains gone green: underwater signposts marking the passage from the Old World to the New.⁴ She is slippery and elusive, choosing one of a thousand channels⁵ to *come back to we*⁶, to unleash her suffering, wailing, and grief—those “separate parts”—wherever they will fit, awaiting love, crying shame.

But hers was not a story to pass on.

Despite the seeming impossibilities of telling this tale, the novel *Beloved* nonetheless evinces Morrison’s ritual foray into the abyss that the black woman Beloved represents: the making, unmaking, and remaking of an African American past that refuses to be left behind. In writing that is in turn poetic (i.e., conjures images), conversational (building upon the African American literary trope of the Talking Book), and quickening (enlivens

the images and talk to *perform*), Morrison divines a history where it never was, but always is. Morrison's foray into *Beloved's* world reveals a world of pain that Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and the others have either quieted in order to simply exist in the world, or that has been systematically quieted and strangled by their experiences as chattel. Thus, *Beloved* the novel both arises from and documents Morrison's confrontation with ghosts and with the trove of feelings, terror, and choking silences that these ghosts incite and also use to commune with the living.

Ghostly confrontation, ritual and divination, and the literary and visual text all come together in *Rituals of Return in African American Women's Twentieth Century Literature and Performance* as a way to explore the artist's struggle to carve a story into the hard place where no story is supposed to exist. I focus specifically on four African American women whose personal and creative writing *and* film, dance, and dramatic endeavors allow such an exploration across the span of the 20th century, including: Josephine Baker's 1935 French film *Princesse Tam Tam*; Katherine Dunham's 1951 dramatic ballet *Southland*; Ntozake Shange's 1976 choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide, when the rainbow is enuf*; and Julie Dash's 1997 novel iteration of *Daughters of the Dust*. Despite differences in style, form, genre, and artistic training, these women (seemingly wittingly in the case with Dunham, Shange, and Dash and largely unwittingly in the case with Baker) engage the resonances of an African American past that is rife with racial, gender, and sexual violence. I am interested in the way Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash craft their literature and performance around the lingering, demanding presence of *Beloved*-like figures. I am interested, too, in what transpires when these women artists say *yes* to ghostly confrontation. How do they reckon with a story that is not supposed to be there—a story

that for all appearances *seems* not to be there? How do they contend with that *something* that will not be named or go away, yet demands some response or action? How do they navigate the personal, professional, and political risks that arise and the ensuing aftermath when they dare to consort with those down there in ancestral burial grounds?

These questions mirror a preoccupation with the past that is also shared by the fields of African American and performance studies. Using the method of close reading in conjunction with theories of performance, trauma, diaspora, and gender to engage the major debates of each field, this project reveals my interest in using the past as a gateway into deep methodological inquiry; that is, my objective is to show *how* writers and performers craft their stories (and scholars subsequently and responsibly craft their criticism) around the ghostly. I do this by reading their performance and literary texts as interlocutors in the racial and gender debates of their respective eras, while being careful not to read their work as racial and gender manifestos only. Rather, I use these debates to deliberate upon the way pain resonates in African American history. Each chapter therefore identifies either a specific historic event or theme that reverberates in the debates that the women artists have engaged. For instance, I connect the exuberance of Josephine Baker's performance career in interwar Paris and the debates surrounding a global black identity to the history of black female display in France and the United States. In another instance, I connect Julie Dash's literary and cinematic venture *Daughters of the Dust* and the African American masculinist realist trends in 1990s cinema to the continued invisibility of black women's history and representation in American cultural history. In both instances, the impact of racial and gender violence often homogenizes a decidedly heterogenous black American community, thus erasing the particularities of

experience, personal stories, and feelings. By studying such instances of the past, the way it reverberates into the contemporary era, and the array of responses that it incites in women artists such as Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash, I show how the past is never truly passed. Moreover, I limn African American cultural production generally, and the creative process particularly, as a ritual that ultimately recuperates and venerates lives, stories, and experiences of African Americans that may not otherwise be acknowledged.

Ritual thus plays an important role in this project. The term is itself subject to various interpretations and enactments. I draw my understanding of ritual from various sources, ranging from Yoruba and Dagara spiritual practices, to the black American pentecostal tradition; to theorizations of ritual as a means of community healing in black performance, theatrical, and cultural studies; to representations of religious ritual in the fiction and drama of James Baldwin, August Wilson, and Randall Kenan.⁷ Although all of these sources draw from or engage with various religious practices, my use of ritual does not espouse any particular religion or its dogma. Rather, I draw from the essence of these practices, favoring the way ritual presupposes crisis, calls a community into being, transgresses the boundaries of time and space, and subsequently allows the coexistence of past, present, and future.

Furthermore, ritual provides the framework to consider the social, political, historical, and material aspects of the mundane world as they intersect with the creative, ancestral, ahistorical, and immaterial aspects of the spiritual world. More will be said about this spiritual world momentarily. At this juncture, however, through its ability to bring together the material and immaterial, ritual itself mirrors my desire to bring together the historical specificity of Baker's, Dunham's, Shange's, and Dash's work with

the ahistorical, ancestral quality of the African American past . By relying on ritual as the overarching metaphor for this interaction, and for this project generally, I am asserting that the creative process—one that we often attribute to the genius and materiality of the body and mind of an individual who works in a particular socio-political milieu—is spiritually inflected. This means, then, that while I honor and celebrate Baker’s, Dunham’s, Shange’s, and Dash’s creative accomplishments as black women who carved out a profession doing what they loved or felt compelled to do, I also envision this accomplishment as collaboratively achieved through their engagement with the past that returns.

The notion of a past that returns is significant and necessary for the goals of this project. At the outset, a past that *comes back to we*, as we have seen in *Beloved*, suggests agency, will, and above all, the reason and means to traverse time and space to return to the present. I share with performance scholar Harvey Young the idea that the past “survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself in the future.”⁸ The past is insistent, self-sustaining, and self-perpetuating. It refuses parentage and unravels the “putative seamlessness of origins.”⁹ Without this temporal fixity—and I might add an attendant corporeal fixity—the past is bound to no borders or locale.¹⁰ Disembodied yet still recognizable as a “spirit” or “ghost,”¹¹ the past can inhabit both the material and the immaterial worlds where it is free to roam as it will, touching and giving shape to what is seen, sometimes appearing uninvited to the living and of its own accord.

Sociologist Avery Gordon takes up this matter in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (1997). I am inspired by her treatment of the past as a force that has its own rules and demands, but that also communicates with the living toward the goal of

resolution and wholeness. Building upon literary tomes such as Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, Gordon proposes the term "haunting" to index the agency of the past and the means by which it, like Morrison's ghost *Beloved*, lays claim on the present. Though not unrelated to trauma, Gordon asserts that haunting is distinctive in that "it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely" (xvi). More specifically, the idea of haunting offers a way to

describe those singular yet repetitive instances when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction, when the over-and-done-with comes alive, when what's been in your blind spot comes into view. Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. These specters or ghosts appear when the trouble they represent and symptomize is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view. [...] The whole essence, if you can use that word, of a ghost is that it has a real presence and demands its due, your attention. Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way [that] we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present. (xvi)

For Gordon, haunting connotes a past, particularly a repressed or unresolved social violence, that *comes back to we*. It impresses itself upon our view, without any seeming intent to go away. By the time home becomes unfamiliar, and we lose our bearings on the world, the trouble or troubled past that we desperately needed to forget has returned and overridden our attempts at amnesia. And if it has overridden our will to forget or our desire to look away, then we might suspect, as I do in *Rituals of Return*, that we are either ready to confront that trouble, or that the unresolved is ready to be resolved. In such moments, the only relief is *yes*.

Confronting the past, or what I will refer to again as the *yes* to ghostly confrontation, connects my use of ritual to the profile of the past that I want to establish for use in this project. Surrounded by the unfamiliarity of home, amid the disarray of

time that doesn't fit the clock, we are forced to revisit—that is, say *yes* to—the turmoil that the unresolved past brings with it. Revisiting that past is particularly frightening because it “always registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or in the present.”¹² Gordon is unclear here if the harm that haunting registers is our own, experienced first hand, or another's harm, vicariously experienced by way of compassion or empathy. Within the context of *Rituals of Return*, I presume that it is both, which, as I will show, helps to explain why Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash were pressed to respond to the situations around them in particular ways. Gordon identifies this impulse to respond as an enduring quality of haunting:

Haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a *something-to-be-done*. Indeed, it seemed to me that haunting was precisely the domain of turmoil and trouble, that moment (of however long duration) when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away, *when something else, something different from before, seems like it must be done*. It is this sociopolitical-psychological state to which haunting referred. (xvi, emphasis added)

Haunting, then, is neither a passive, coincidental occurrence, nor some metaphysical, “invisible or ineffable excess”¹³; rather, it is a formulation of the past with agency and demands. It is at the same time, as Gordon shows, a “sociopolitical-psychological state,” showing how the past implicates the present, and with it, the realm of the mundane and our will to act. This is precisely why it “is a frightening experience”: we are tossed into crisis through our need to respond to a *something* that we cannot name or evade. In such moments when we cannot put away disturbed feelings, the past has laid claim on the present, in a sense possessing it—holding on so tightly that we, enthralled by the very thing that we cannot see or name, have no choice but go about the business of doing something different from before.

Within the context of *Rituals of Return*, ritual is that something-to-be-done. To recall the paradigm suggested in *Beloved* again, ritual, as a subgenre of performance and a metaphor for the creative process, is the bridge between the artist's (varied and sometimes personal) need to pass the story on—to *do something different*—and the ancestral abyss where *Beloved* consorts with those down there. Ritual thus gives us entry into the *story that was not fit to pass on*. Consorting with the past as a means of effecting change upon the socio-politics of the mundane world, the artist plunges into the immaterial, atemporal, spiritual world of ritual. In *Rituals of Return*, this world shares characteristics with Nigerian dramatist-critic Wole Soyinka's notion of the "Fourth Stage."¹⁴ Soyinka describes the Fourth Stage as "an undented vastness," a "chthonic realm, a storehouse for creative and destructive essences."¹⁵ *Chthonic* refers to "dwelling in or beneath the surface of the earth."¹⁶ In Western thought, the chthonic realm is often akin to hell or the nether, underworld of the dead. In African diasporic cosmology, however, particularly that espoused by the Yoruba, the chthonic realm is "the natural home of the unseen deities, a resting-place for the departed, and a staging-house for the unborn."¹⁷ For Soyinka, the chthonic realm is a storehouse for all that does not happen in the physical world, so that it may be affiliated with the dead and the ancestral, and at the same time be akin to Western perceptions of heaven as the seat of deific powers. Let me emphasize that in *Rituals of Return* that storehouse also includes those "separate parts" that Morrison spoke about, or that which remains unresolved in the mundane world. The extremes—the heavenly and the infernal, and the ritualized dead and the unresolved pain of the improperly buried—reflect Soyinka's formulation of the Fourth Stage as home to creative and destructive essences, and consequently as home to both beauty and the grotesque.

Although the Fourth Stage lacks the physical, planetary qualities of flesh and blood, its power is communicated by “intuitions [and] sudden psychic emanations [which] could come, logically, only from such an incomparable immensity.”¹⁸ The intuitions and emanations that Soyinka speaks of are in *Rituals of Return* synonymous with the impulse to do something ignited by haunting. It is thus through this impulse that the Fourth Stage, the chthonic world of ritual, is in contact with the physical, planetary realm and impacts the creative process.

Although Soyinka’s formulation of the Fourth Stage is particular to and derivative from Yoruba culture, it has significant implications for this project on African diasporic texts, particularly in defining the world and character of ritual. The vastness of the Fourth Stage mirrors the ritual space that I envision for this project. It also both accommodates and enacts Gordon’s model of a past with its own agency and demands, yet adds to it a spiritual explanation for the means by which that past communicates and interacts with the physical, material world. Throughout this project, I will refer to it as “ritual space,” the “Fourth Stage,” and most often as “the ancestral burial grounds.”

My use of the term “ancestral burial grounds” is inspired by Suzan-Lori Parks’ use of the term in her 1994 essay “Possession,” in which she discusses her creative process as a playwright. In the essay, Parks claims that one of her tasks is to note what events in African American history have been “unrecorded, dismembered, washed out” in the larger American historical record.¹⁹ She does so by “[dancing] around spinning around to ‘get out of the way’” as those separate parts stream in. The influx is so great that the self “simultaneously disappears *his bones cannot be found* and is revealed” through a process that is akin to spiritual possession. Whereas the “disappearance” of the self marks the inward

movement of the past, or its condensation into the artist's consciousness, the self "revealed" marks for me those moments when the past collides with, or is filtered through, the artist's personal story and creative training.

Therefore, in my readings of Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash, I stress how they were "possessed" *by* the past through their engagement with the debates of their time, while also showing how they "*possessed* that past," shaping it with the tools and innovations acquired through their evolution as artists. In this regard, the cohort of women at the center of this dissertation are both possessors and possessed, lending credence to Parks' assertion that the relationship between the two "is, like ownership is, multidirectional."²⁰ Here, in the throes of spiritual possession, being possessed and possessing, they "locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, [then] write it down."²¹

What happens in Parks' ancestral burial ground similarly happens in the ancestral burial ground as I define and deploy it in this project: the creative product is born through a collaboration between the artist and the past, between the spiritual world and the mundane. It is thus through excavating the silences of history for those bones or remains that the performance, literary, or cinematic texts by Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash arise. These texts document their *yses* to ghostly confrontation; moreover they signify a reconstructive process whereby bones—those separate parts, which I also refer to as "remains" and "remnants" throughout this dissertation—are gathered and formed into a semblance of *Beloved* and all of those down there. Through this artistic recuperation of bodies, stories, events, and feelings, this cohort of women revise "the Time Line—creating history where it is and always was but has not yet been divined."²²

Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash made history as women who broke barriers, engaged in activism, and created highly prized and critically acclaimed literary and performance pieces. And by piecing together those bones and separate parts—those disparate situations, times, places and events—through dance, film, and drama, they literally *made* history, discerning and attributing significance to the otherwise obscure or hidden. Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash consequently exhibit the qualities of diviners, and their works of divinations. Whereas ritual summons the artists into the ancestral burial ground, and possession marks their intimate communion with the past, they emerge from the grounds with divinations—regarded here as the creative product.

Thus *Rituals of Return*, as a story about the creative process, unfolds where text meets performance, where the ancestral realm crosses that of the living, and where spiritual rites affirm the fact of black humanity, thus achieving political import. Positioned at these interstices, I unravel how Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash build their literature and performance around the lingering presence of those in the ancestral burial grounds. The research questions that I have developed for this project invite a fresh examination of Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash, four African American women artists who have already received significant critical treatment for their dance, film, and theatrical work in African American and Women's Studies. Recent scholarly tendencies are to read their works as enactments of racial and feminist agency, while the women themselves are billed as race-conscious artists who confronted the major social and cultural questions of their era. Josephine Baker, for instance, is most often read as the embodiment of and as an embodied challenge to oppositions between the modern and the primitive, the historical and ahistorical, the savage and the civilized, as works by Tyler Stovall, Mae G.

Henderson, Kathryn Kalinak, and Karen Dalton and Henry Louis Gates have aptly shown.²³ Baker's dancing and her persona (on and offstage) become metonymic for the tenuous relationship between France and colonized countries in the early twentieth century. In other instances, the value of Baker's dancing rests in its political implications, specifically as a means to flee and critique the racial volatility of her home country, and, moreover, grapple with the changing discourse of race, gender, and sexuality during the Roaring Twenties. Consequently, Baker's contribution to and reliance on a rich African American dance and performance tradition in the early years of her Parisian career—a tradition replete with a complex and difficult past, including her family's and her own—recedes into the background.

The ensuing implications of this historiography are great and, at the same time, are paradoxically undermined by the recuperative, celebratory projects of late twentieth century African American and Women's Studies. Despite the best intentions of disciplinary approaches that value and privilege her position as an African American, woman, and African American woman, the scholarship nonetheless situates Baker's creative work as a reaction to the needs and desires of her white colonial viewers. The political imperatives of the disciplines overwhelm the ghostly confrontations that I show resonate in Baker's work. Seen from this vantage point, the scholarship about Baker demarcates the limits of this critical disciplinary interchange.

The imperatives of this disciplinary interchange are not unique, for Baker's work was read in similar ways by contemporary reviewers of the interwar period. The 1928 publication of "Exotic Puppets" by Martinican intellectual Jane Nardal offers one such example, showing how the political imperatives of Black Internationalism prevented

Nardal from seeing the African diasporic past in Baker's dancing. I examine the Baker-Nardal discursive encounter in greater detail in the following chapter and substantiate it with a reading of Baker's climactic conga sequence in her 1935 film *Princess Tam Tam*. Suffice it to say for now that Nardal could not see past the exuberance and materiality of Baker's dancing body, that she could not connect with the past that lingered behind her performance.

This problem resonates with the critical reception of the other women I study in this project. In their roles as performers or as creators of performed work, Dunham, Shange, and Dash similarly invite scholars to identify the multiple and varied ways that black women's cultural production operates discursively and through the materiality of the body. *Rituals of Return* contributes to and redirects this conversation by paying attention to the lingering presence of Beloved-like figures who give shape and texture to their creative works. My intent is not to read their work for tropes that are commonly associated with representations of the past in African American literary or dramatic criticism, such as the ancestral figure in the guise of Aunt Esther in playwright August Wilson's play *Gem of the Ocean* (2006), or displays of magic or supernatural powers such as those wielded by the titular character of Gloria Naylor's novel *Mama Day* (1988). Although such tropes may be found to varying degrees in the works that I study in this project, my goal is to locate and track the emergence and demands of the ancestral burial grounds, and the means by which Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash respond to these demands—a volleying between the past and the present that I equate in *Rituals of Return* with the creative process.

The creative process that I unravel in this project has several implications. First it establishes the past not simply as a co-creator of creative work, but as a demanding work partner that leaves its imprint in the artists' need to tell the impossible tale of the African American past. For instance, Katherine Dunham created *Southland* in 1951 because the continued violence of lynching in the American South, and the grief that it incited among African American communities, was rendered negligible (i.e., *ghostly*) by the failure of the U.S. Senate to pass anti-lynching legislation. No footage of the premiere in Santiago, Chile and subsequent performance in Paris, France exist in her archive; only a small collection of production documents and a handful of secondary sources suggest that it existed at all. Using these literary sources and not the visual of the performance itself, I read her pressing need to show the atrocities of lynching to an international audience as an index of a past that rests uneasily and that returns to cry shame. As a result, *Southland*—and the *creation* of *Southland* particularly, including the personal and professional strain that it caused with the U.S. State Department and her own company members—documents Dunham's *yes* to ghostly confrontation. In the course of saying yes, Dunham choreographs the weariness and hyperbola of crafting a life around the remains of a violent past, and the ironic impossibility of attributing that wariness to anything particular. This *something*, felt but undefined, at once fleeing the confinement of language and testing the limits of expression, was for Dunham the true human tragedy.

Dunham's production divines a history—rendered ghostly by the need to expunge the specter of lynching from national memory—where it never was supposed to exist and exposes the tragedy that lingered there. At the same time, Dunham's dramatic achievement also theorizes African American culture as one born of and reproduced by

way of marked suffering, violence, and terror. The true human tragedy, as I show, is not only black people's inability to articulate the immensity of this terror as Dunham reasoned, but of living with the ensuing crisis in identity—that is, the estrangement between the inner need and outer demand and the loss of individuality. This, I show, is the legacy of living among Beloved-like ghosts of the African American past.

Twenty some years later, poet Ntozake Shange confronts the crisis as it pertained to the lives of young African American women in her 1975 production of *for colored girls who have considered suicide, when the rainbow is enuf: a choreopoem*. In a series of twenty poems spoken, danced, and dramatized by seven young African American women dressed in the colors of the rainbow (the “colored girls”), Shange identifies this legacy as the “metaphysical dilemma” of being black, women, and alive.²⁴ In this chapter devoted to her, I identify this dilemma as a *crisis of estrangement*. Shange worked to alleviate this estrangement through the *choreopoem*, a dramatic form that she coined and developed to explore the richness of black womanhood in the United States. Shange's choreopoetic form is particularly intriguing, first for its ritual underpinnings, and second for the way that it remedies the crisis of estrangement that Dunham unveiled more than two decades before. As I show in this chapter, the ritual anatomy of *for colored girls* allows Shange to dwell on the ways black women were “silent about many things, and ‘forgot’ many other things”²⁵ in the face of racial, gender, and sexual violence, including their individual and matrilineal power. By reconnecting with this forgotten power, or *àshe*, Shange and the colored girls ritually “[unearth] the mislaid, forgotten, &/or misunderstood women writers, painters, mothers, cowgirls, & union leaders” of the African American past.²⁶

Whereas Baker's connection to the African American and diasporic past hid beneath the exuberance of her conga dancing, and Dunham's in her depiction of the lynching ritual, Shange's choreopoem offers a way to soothe the estrangement and lingering loneliness—the “inside kind—wrapped tight like skin”²⁷—that Beloved experienced down there in the watery abyss. Shange's work illustrates how the unrest of the past can aid our request to be made whole. The return of past unrest, then, initiates a mission to free and to be set free, to quiet what poet Elizabeth Alexander called the elusiveness of Negro rest, an idea that writer-filmmaker Julie Dash illustrates in 1997 *Daughters of the Dust: A Novel*. Dash published this novel approximately six years after the theatrical release of her film by the same name. The novel begins some twenty years after many members of the Peasant family move to the mainland in search of better job and educational opportunities. The unborn child, Elizabeth Peasant, is now a grown woman who shares a special bond with her family and holds an affinity for the old ways of her great grandmother Nana Peasant. Elizabeth's journey to bridge her own individual life with the customs of the old folks coincides with her cousin Amelia's return to the island to pursue scholarly pursuits. But when Amelia and her cousin Lucy stumble across the remains of three haphazardly buried slaves, Amelia's pursuits must soon give way to a deep communion with the pain and suffering of the past. Through mourning rituals, Amelia and Lucy confront the rest-less past, and, with the help of their family and island community, properly bury the remains and bid them rest.

Amelia's and Lucy's experiences bring the story of *Rituals of Return* full circle. For it is only after mining the exuberance of Baker's dancing for the African American and diasporic past that lurked beneath; after acknowledging the risks that Dunham

encountered as she engaged with the past and allowed one story to stand in for them all; after seeing the necessity of ritual and community in Shange's recovery of matrilineal support and self healing—only after all of these things can Dash craft a tale in which Beloved like figures not only return, but are given the rest they seek. As the culminating tale in the saga of *Rituals of Return*, Dash's novel and film iterations of *Daughters of the Dust* lend themselves to reflections on the methodological concerns raised in the previous chapters.

Using correspondence between Zora Neale Hurston and W.E.B. Du Bois, I further elaborate upon these methodological concerns in the Epilogue. In 1945, Hurston wrote to Du Bois, who she called the “Dean of American Negro Artists,” asking him to “propose a cemetery for the illustrious Negro dead.”²⁸ Hurston's request rested on the premise that no Negro celebrity should “lie in inconspicuous forgetfulness,” but should be interred in such a way that their spirits do not evaporate.²⁹ Although Hurston's hopes for a cemetery were not realized, she nonetheless amasses in her letter a collective, unidentified “we” who must assume responsibility for the Negro dead. I take the liberty in these concluding pages to identify the scholar as a part of this “we.” The scholarly endeavor, like the creative endeavor, holds the potential to rescue Beloved and those down there in the ancestral burial grounds—unnamed, unclaimed, forgotten, and often improperly buried—from inconspicuous forgetfulness.

The works by Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash represent four ways that the past *come back to we* and the means by which ritual, divination, and possession helped them to keep that past within reach. Their works and my choice to focus specifically on women also require a word on how these spiritual operations inform the analytical category of

gender. To be clear, the objective of this project is not to redefine or reformulate the concept of *gender* within a black cultural context. I do, however, readily acknowledge that Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash operate in the gendered spaces of the spirit worker. In their own way, using their chosen genre, this cohort of women artists are brought together in the way their works excavate the life in the silences; wrestle forgotten things back into the realm of memory; and cry shame on behalf of those like *Beloved* whose return will change things forever. Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash issue rites, divine, and surrender to possession in the quest to carve the impossible tale of the African American past out of that place where it is not supposed to be: in the music halls and cabarets of interwar Paris; amid the grace and high culture of a Chilean concert dance stage; amid cries for “Black Power Now!”; and there too in intellectual projects that lead to the lush green fields of Dawtuh Island. Armed with the trinity of fact, memory—their own and others’—and imagination, Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash do women’s work: cleansing, preparing, nurturing, building the scaffolding or the stage onto which the past *comes back to we*.³⁰ In so doing, they unveil, reveal, and expose black interior life, and with it the social forces, terrors, abuses, and suffering—past and present, spoken and unspoken, remembered and forgotten—that give it its shape and texture. All the while, their creative works show the footprints of *Beloved* and all of those down there who “come and go, come and go.”³¹ Footprints that are so familiar, so sure to fit any foot that lands there. So sure. Footprints that lead us—should we dare follow—where we have never been on this side of memory: down, down into the water and to all that is down there.

Introduction Notes

¹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 274. The page numbers for the remaining quotes in the first paragraph are cited in the text.

² Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 3.

³ Dash, *Daughters of the Dust: A Novel*, 236.

⁴ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 6.

⁵ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 3.

⁶ Dash, *Daughters of the Dust: A Novel*, 237.

⁷ Ritual has been theorized in Nigerian playwright and dramatic critic Wole Soyinka's *Myth, Literature, and the African World*; shaman-scholar Malidoma Somé's, *Ritual: Power, Healing, and Community* and *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*; in the research and writing of playwright and director Barbara Ann Teer as discussed in scholar of African American theater Lundeana Thomas' *Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre*; performance studies theorist E. Patrick Johnson's, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity*; cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson's "When You Divide Body and Soul Problems Multiply: The Black Church and Sex" as it pertains to ritual worship within the black church; author's James Baldwin's novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and drama *The Amen Corner*; dramatist August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*; anthropologist-novelist Zora Neale Hurston's *Sanctified Church*; and novelist Randall Kenan's *Visitation of Spirits*.

⁸ Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 21.

⁹ Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 30. Roach declares this specifically about his concept of *genealogy of performance*, which shares my own concern with the way the present, adorned with performed rites of belonging and exclusion, echoes with events of the past.

¹⁰ I am inspired here by Sharon Holland's *Raising the Dead*, in which Holland argues that "the dead acknowledge no borders" (18).

¹¹ Holland, *Raising the Dead*, 23-24.

¹² Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Soyinka has written extensively about the ritual impulses of Yoruba drama, and, by his account, ritual is the metaphoric scaffolding of any Yoruba dramatic endeavor. Soyinka's theorization of the Fourth Stage is central to his understanding of ritual, and, subsequently, of Yoruba drama. See "Fourth Stage," in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, 140-160.

¹⁵ Soyinka, "Morality and Aesthetics in the Ritual Archetype" in *Myth, Literature and the African World*, 2. Soyinka asserts that the setting of ritual takes place in "the cosmic entirety," which he later identifies and describes as the Fourth Stage.

¹⁶ *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "chthonic," accessed November 22, 2011, <http://www.oed.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/view/Entry/32645?redirectedFrom=chthonic#eid>.

¹⁷ Soyinka, "The Ritual Archetype" in *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, 2.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Parks, "Possession" in *The America Play*, 4.

²⁰ Parks, "Possession," 3; the previous two quotes also share this citation.

²¹ Parks, "Possession," 4.

²² Parks, "Possession" 5.

²³ A body of scholarship explores the oppositions that Baker supposedly embodied as a performer on the interwar Parisian music hall stage, including Mae G. Henderson, "Josephine Baker and La Revue Nègre: From Ethnography to Performance"; Karen C. Dalton and Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen Through Parisian Eyes"; Tyler Edward Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* and "The New Woman and the New Empire: Josephine Baker and Changing Views of Femininity in Interwar France"; Samir Dayal, "Blackness as Symptom: Josephine Baker and European Identity"; Kathryn Kalinak, "Disciplining Josephine Baker: Gender, Race, and the Limits of Disciplinarity"; Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle*; T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French*; Carole Sweeney, *From Fetish to Subject: Race, Modernism, and Primitivism, 1919-1935*. The trend is currently changing, demonstrated in literary critic Anne Anlin Cheng's recent publication *Skin Deep: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*.

²⁴ Shange, *for colored girls*, 45.

²⁵ Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 70.

²⁶ Shange, *for colored girls*, x.

²⁷ Morrison, *Beloved*, 274.

²⁸ Zora Neale Hurston to W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Correspondence of W. E. B. DuBois*: Vol.3, 42.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ By "women's work," I mean the practices that women typically and customarily do in preparation for funerary rites. I explore this more in my examination of Dash's novel *Daughters of the Dust*.

³¹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 275.

CHAPTER 1

Josephine Baker and Reckoning with Ghosts

How do we reckon with what modern history has rendered ghostly?
--Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*

African-American dancer Josephine Baker (1906-1975) opens her 1977 memoir *Josephine* with characteristic command and effect: “My happiest childhood memory?” she asks, launching headfirst into recollections of her childhood in St. Louis, Missouri. “I really don’t know, but I can tell you which was the worst. It marked me, first unconsciously and later all too consciously, for life.”¹ Baker, affectionately nicknamed “Tumpy” by her family, recalls her family’s efforts to create a home with a tinge of mischief and an almost childlike wonder. The gaily colored scraps of paper that lined the wall were not simply protection from the Midwestern cold, but a beautiful “crazy quilt of overlapping images” that transformed their “heap of dilapidated boards” into a palace. And her father shared stories that he had learned from his parents about “whites and blacks living together in peace.”² Although his parents had been slaves, Baker and her siblings were free, which by her reasoning “meant that [they] were lucky even though [their] dinner that night had been rotten potatoes stolen from a rich man’s garbage pail.”³

But the magic of the brightly colored paper and her father’s stories soon fade as she recalls the fateful night that marked her for the rest of her life: the evening of the

1917 St. Louis Race Riots. Suddenly shaken awake, Baker's mother rushed the children outdoors, only to be met with chaos, and the quick explanation that "a white woman was raped."⁴ Without knowing the meaning of the words, the eleven-year-old Baker intuited that they described the ultimate catastrophe.

After a night of Apocalyptic horror, the family made the long and terrible walk home. Baker remembers: "An eerie silence had fallen, punctuated by whimpers, sobs and moans rising from the shadows." Friends stopped the family, some offering bits of news: "Do you know what they did to John? They ripped out his eyes!" And another: "They got Eloise. They cut up her stomach...And they tore out the baby!" The bearer of this second bit of news, an old woman, began to howl, "a sound that seemed to come from her very guts."⁵

Baker returned with her mother and siblings to their dilapidated house, where they reunited with her father. Slumped in a corner, his eyes and spastic muttering reflected the horror that they had witnessed. So, was there any truth in the allegations of rape? Baker and her family—indeed, the rest of the city—would never know, for the accused was now dead, silenced by mob violence and the presumptions of black male guilt. "So that was it," Baker concludes.

Because of a lie, men and women of color had suffered and died. Surely such injustice would someday end since God, although he was white, had said we were all brothers. I swore that day from the bottom of my heart that I, Tumpy, would somehow help to make this change occur. I would remember the massacre all my life.⁶

By the time Baker's memoir *Josephine* was posthumously published in English in 1988, the mark of the riots had seemingly—publicly at least—been buried deeply beneath her rush to fame, first on the "chitlin circuit" in the U.S. South, urban North, and

Midwest, then later as the top billed and sometimes blackfaced comedy girl in popular black musicals such as Noble Sissle's and Eubie Blake's *Shuffle Along* (1921) and *Chocolate Dandies* (1924).⁷ Baker's end-girl antics and penchant for comedy made her an audience favorite, and served her well even after she made her 1925 debut in Paris in the all-black review *La Revue Nègre*. Caught in the whirlwind of her Parisian success, the spectacle of Baker's dancing and mischief-making were the key not only to her continued fame, but to assertions of individuality amid the raging, homogenizing *négrophilie* that characterized the interwar period in the French capital.

Baker was a major contributor to the Parisian entertainment world for the next fifty years, but she never recreated for the stage the scenes of racial, gender and sexual violence that she, her family and friends witnessed during the night of the race riots. Yet, as I argue in this chapter, the magnitude of the St. Louis events, and the larger, more encompassing history of racial oppression that they represented, not only marked Baker, but lingered within her spectacular, amusing performances of racial otherness during the interwar period. The pressing question that arises is aptly articulated by sociologist Avery Gordon in the chapter epigraph: *how do we reckon with what modern history has rendered ghostly?* In other words, framed within my investigation of performance as a dynamic interchange with the past, how do we make visible a past that has been made invisible by the visual din of Baker's performances? How do we grapple with and rely on dance performance as an index of a past that refuses to be left behind? *How do we reckon with what the spectacle of Baker's dancing has rendered ghostly?*

These questions flag the concerns that drive my investigation in this chapter, namely black performance as a troubled entanglement between past pain *and* spectacular

amusement. My investigation is set into motion through an engagement with notions of visibility, invisibility, and hypervisibility, each of which calls attention to what is accessible or discernible in, evades, or overwhelms the performance field, or the visual space in which the performance unfolds. Because performance relies so heavily on visual faculties and what is presented in the visual field, one might be hard pressed to see *beyond* it, to the past pain that lingers there and renders its own sobering performance of reawakened suffering and terror.

The reliance on the visual presents a special quandary for black performance generally and black performers like Baker particularly, who have been “envisioned fundamentally as vehicles for white enjoyment.”⁸ Allusions to Baker as “Black Venus,” “African Eros” and “African frenzy” in reviews from the contemporary interwar era highlight the extent to which her exuberant dancing not only became the defining quality of her work, but as I show in this chapter also a projection and fulfillment of white—and more broadly of (French) colonial and (U.S.) postcolonial—desire. The focus on the spectacular nature—the *hypervisibility* or visual din—of her performances anesthetizes the past that lies underneath, rendering it *invisible* and presumably nonexistent.

This invisibility humiliates the *fact* of the past and mirrors the significant exclusion of black suffering from the national historical record. But by addressing the entanglements between past pain and present amusement in Baker’s performances, we uncover the “pastness of black performance,” or its accumulative, archival quality including the past pains and suffering that linger there. I refer to this gathering of past pains and the violence of exclusion as the *ancestral burial ground*. It is, as I show, at once a

site to which performance returns as well as an outward reaching of the past, an enactment of its agency, demands, and refusal to be left behind.

The final dance sequence of Baker's 1935 Arys cinematic production *Princess Tam Tam* offers an opportunity to further investigate this claim. *Princess Tam Tam* is a Pygmalion-like story in which Baker, cast as the North African street urchin Aouina, is "civilized" through the efforts of a French writer named Max and his comic sidekick Coton. In an attempt to make his estranged wife jealous, Max later introduces Aouina to Paris as the pretend Indian Princess Tam Tam. To his delight, she quickly becomes the sweetheart of Parisian high society; to his shame and embarrassment, Princess Tam Tam—under the lure of alcohol and drumming—quickly and publicly reverts to the wild, rambunctious Aouina when she dances an Afro-Cuban conga before a crowd of influential Parisians. Aouina's conga performance—rendered with characteristic Baker abandon and charm—brings Max's civilizing mission to a spectacular close.

In the course of exploring this scene, we must confront the currency of Baker's spectacular performances of racial and colonial otherness in the Parisian interwar years—an era that was heavily informed by the rising rhetoric of black internationalism. Contemporary reviews of Baker's work during the interwar years offer an especially rich site for this evaluation. Two particular reviews—one by French dance critic Andre Levinson and the other by U.S. poet e.e. cummings—are a mainstay in Baker scholarship and I return to them in my own exploration of the pastness of Baker's conga performance. Although recent scholarly responses to Levinson's and cummings' reviews fault them for their shared preoccupation with the spectacular nature of Baker's dancing and the ways in which they steep their readings of her work within discourses of

blackness that were in circulation at that time in the United States and France, I find their preoccupations particularly telling. I read their inability to pinpoint or capture the nature of Baker's dancing as the presence of a force—a mysterious, unnamable *something* that variously terrifies, excites, and baffles them—that mirrors the strange and uncanny ways that the past rears its head in black performance.

The liberties that I take in revisiting Levinson's and cummings' responses are also extended and further developed in my reading of a critical cultural essay by Jane Nardal, a black woman intellectual who was already residing in Paris upon Baker's arrival in the city. In an article entitled "Pantins exotiques" ("Black Puppets"), Nardal reflects upon the impact of black cultures, and the impact of Josephine Baker particularly, on contemporary 1920s popular Parisian culture. Despite her interests in and strong advocacy for the construction of a global black internationalism, which she writes about in "L'Internationalisme noir" (Black Internationalism), Nardal, who once described herself in a letter to the African American philosopher and cultural patron Alain Locke as "a good French negress," resorts to the same colonial and postcolonial language used by Levinson and cummings to describe Baker's dancing.⁹ Nardal is similarly baffled, as well as disturbed, by what she reads as the anachronistic juxtaposition of modern black American performance and the "African frenzy" in Baker's performances. Although my research does not reveal that Nardal and Baker ever met in person, their discursive encounter nonetheless presents the opportunity to revisit Baker's work within—indeed, as one thread in—the emerging formulations of interwar black internationalism.

By situating Nardal's essay alongside those by Levinson and cummings, and using all three to contextualize my reading of the climactic dance sequence in Baker's *Princesse*

Tam Tam, I show how we must reckon with the past by first identifying the slippages and breaks—the moments of past pain and amusement—in performance through which the past returns to us. It is here, by variously demanding our attention and at the same time evading complete capture in textual and visual representation that the past performs its own pastness, refusing to be left behind.

La Baker: An Improperly Buried Body

The world knows Josephine Baker for her banana skirts and her bright, charismatic disposition. Baker is likely known more for her naked breasts and “intelligent derriere” than for her acting and singing.¹⁰ Beautiful, engaging, temperamental, and driven, Baker brought a decided charisma and sensuality to dance that both stunned and enraptured her audiences. Baker’s star sensibility spurred her popularity in film and on the music hall stage during the interwar years and also spewed into popular culture as French women rushed to tan their skins, shellac their hair with Baker pomade, and experience the grip of *le tumulte noir* through popular dance trends like the Charleston and the Black Bottom.¹¹ French sketch artist Paul Colin’s *Le tumulte noir*, a lithographic homage to Josephine Baker and other African-American performers and musicians who captivated Paris at the height of *les années folles*, offers a visual of the craze stirred by Baker’s presence in the French capital. Colin, who also sketched the publicity posters for the all-black revue that launched Baker’s career, captured the French capital’s infatuation with all things black.¹² By Colin’s visual account, no one was immune from this seemingly contagious blackness—celebrities and city workers alike frantically practice their

Charleston across forty-five vividly colored lithographs. Indeed, the City of Lights had fallen under the spell of black American music and dance.¹³

Baker's success was further indebted to the changing notions of gender and womanhood occurring in the French capital following the end of the First World War.¹⁴ Within this context, Baker's dancing—perceived in the public eye as wild, frenetic, and even beyond description—evidenced an unprecedented expression of gender and sexual liberation. As a *black* woman, her performances of colonial otherness also brought the anxieties about metropole and colony close to home. Yet within the framing of the Parisian music hall and filmic screen, Baker's black body, cast and scripted to exude an untamable exoticism, quieted these anxieties and even further demarcated the lines between France and its colonies. At once a site of desire and disdain, Baker—her body, her person, and her performances—became, at least within the framework of colonialism, a delightful, palatable Otherness. It was out of and into this cultural milieu that Baker's performances emerged.

Baker responded with seeming good humor to the French demand for performances of colonial otherness during the interwar period. Stage shows and film roles were infused with her characteristic charm and mischief, suggesting a satisfaction with her roles. As we have already seen, however, Baker's moments of mischief invite further, deeper exploration of what lies in the imbrication between pain and amusement. Baker's return to the United States to play in the Zigfield Follies of 1936 offers a case in point. Baker was clearly aware of the importance of her body in fulfilling demands of otherness, a point that she raises with some bitterness in her memoir *Josephine*. Appearing in the Follies production in remarkable costuming—for instance, as a sari-swathed Indian

woman and as a scantily clad conga-dancing West Indian girl, a role that she had played the year before while taping her French film *Princesse Tam Tam*—and dancing in her famous banana skirt (albeit modified for her American audience), Baker comments on what it was like to perform in a milieu characterized by a return to strict American Puritanical moral standards. While other principal draws like Bob Hope and Fannie Brice—who filled the bill as the funny comic girl, a part that Baker typically played in her productions—were well received as true, all-American comics, there was no room for Baker to be her true comic self. Instead she was “overglamorized, hopelessly type-cast” and relegated to roles that reiterated and over-dramatized the racial otherness that she represented to white Americans.¹⁵ Within the context of American postcolonial entertainment culture, she was, as she observed, only a “body to be exhibited in various stages of undress.”¹⁶

As Baker’s comments suggest, there was a demand for her body in various stages of undress on both sides of the Atlantic. In the example of her run with the Zigfield Follies, this demand was rooted less in her star abilities and performance prowess, and more in a longstanding reading of the black body as a site of white enjoyment.¹⁷ In this regard, she was reduced to a dancing body that by nature of its black skin was already overburdened with the lingering stereotypes of black women’s hypersexuality, and that was fundamentally regarded as an available, accessible vehicle for white pleasure and desire.¹⁸ Minus a soul, minus the animating force of her own personality and experiences, Baker’s black dancing body acquires the vacant allure of a curio: she becomes a breathing, fleshy fascination or peculiarity that is worthy of exhibition, but void of its own story. Envisioned and read as such by audiences and reviewers of the era, the terror of

Baker's childhood experiences fades away, overshadowed by the exuberance of her performances. What remains (in the visual field, that is) is only a shell that is subject to and reflective of the needs and expectations of the viewer.

The means by which black performance is vulnerable to and remedy for this phenomenal extraction of soul and story from the body is an idea that I return to in the following chapters. For the moment, however, I want to maintain focus on the illusiveness of Baker's stories of terror and suffering in her signature performances. The bitterness that resonates in her complaint acknowledges and bears witness to the biting legacy that she inherited as a black woman, and as a black woman performer particularly, in the United States. Furthermore, her comments remind readers why she had chosen to make a life and career for herself in France.¹⁹

Baker writes as if she was free from this kind of humiliation in France. Yet her comments take on a different meaning when considered within the French history of exhibiting black women's bodies. Layered beneath her characteristic mischief and sarcasm, Baker is conjuring, as it were, the example of Saartjie Baartman, known as the "Hottentot Venus," whose exhibition in London and Paris in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries stands as the precedent to her own spectacles of bodily display on the music hall stage and filmic screen.²⁰ Baartman's black female body became the epitome of racial and sexual difference and abnormality during the nineteenth century. She, like Baker decades later, was perceived as a curio, or spectacular collection of sexual parts.²¹ What lingers within Baker's words, then, is a commentary on the spectacle of black flesh and the extent to which the violence of display reduces Baartman and Baker only to the parts that arouse both disdain and desire among her (white colonial) viewers.

Furthermore, using her own body and coding her reflections in characteristic mischief, Baker theorizes the affiliation between the violence of display and white amusement, and how this affiliation is projected upon the black female body, both in performance and in various stages of undress. By situating herself within a genealogy of black female display, Baker calls attention to the phantasmal comings-and-goings of figures like Baartman who land and come into view in unexpected moments of mischief and sarcasm. These are the breaks that the Baartman-specter needs to exist: mischief and sarcasm mark the location of the ancestral burial grounds.

Baker's writing urges us to look to the body to locate the ancestral burial ground. However, reviews from the era—by white men and black women—and even recent scholarly readings suggest that locating the ancestral burial ground by way of the performing body is not so easily achieved. In recent Baker scholarship, the matter of the corporeal—the *body*—becomes a place where the preoccupations of French modernism, capitalism, and the racial and gender politics of the flapper era collide.²² At the same time, scholars situate Baker's body as a blank slate onto which the ambivalences, anxieties, and questions about France and its colonies were projected.²³ Read within this framework, French colonialism becomes the prism through which Baker's body and the *corps* of her performances are perceived and consumed.

However, these two frameworks for reading and disciplining Baker's body converge in a particular subset of Baker scholarship in which the critic does not know quite *what* to make of Baker's body and her performances. This was certainly the case in the dance criticism that she received from French critics. French dance critic Andre

Levinson's commentary, particularly, has become paradigmatic for such readings. In a 1925 essay on the popularity of black music and dance, Levinson writes:

There seems to emanate from her violently shuddering body, her bold dislocations, her springing movement, a gushing stream of rhythm...In the short pas de deux of the savages, which came as the finale of the *Revue Nègre*, there was a wild splendor and magnificent animality. Certain of Miss Baker's poses, back arched, haunches protruding, arms entwined and uplifted in a phallic symbol, had the compelling potency of the finest examples of negro sculpture. The plastic sense of a race of sculptors came to life and the frenzy of African Eros swept over the audience. It was no longer a grotesque dancing girl that stood before them, but the black Venus that haunted Baudelaire. The dancer's personality had transcended the character of her dance.²⁴

Levinson is clearly fascinated if not baffled by Baker's body. The allusions to beauty and the grotesque reflect the binary logic of "us/them," "metropole/colony," "modern/savage" that characterized the cultural discourse of mid-1920s. Writing from this discursive position, Levinson can comment with condescension for Baker's presumed "wild splendor and magnificent animality" and at the same time with admiration for her "compelling potency" which rivals the "finest examples of negro sculpture." Levinson's juxtaposition reflects the limitations of language and representation to capture that *something* that exudes from Baker's dancing body. Unable to articulate that *something*, he is left to describe Baker's body within a range of images that evoke the modern/primitive, beautiful/grotesque binary, so that "black Venus" sets against "a grotesque dancing girl," and the "frenzy" of her dance against the still potency of black sculpture. Levinson finally discloses the true relationship between Baker's dancing body and French culture when he likens Baker to the "black Venus that haunted Baudelaire": the magnificent grotesquerie of her body and her performance become palatable only when used in the service of European culture and desire.

American critics similarly reviewed Baker's performances, ironically steeping their reviews in language very similar to Levinson's. Take, for instance, poet e.e. cummings' review of Baker's role in the 1926 French music-hall production of *La Folie du Jour*. In a 1929 article published in *Vanity Fair*, cummings compared that performance with Baker's earlier performance in Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle's 1924 Broadway production of *The Chocolate Dandies*. By cummings' account, Baker "resembled some tall, vital, incomparably fluid nightmare which crossed its eyes and warped its limbs in a purely unearthly manner—some vision which opened new avenues of fear, which suggested nothing but itself and which, consequently, was strictly aesthetic." He continues:

[Baker] enters through a dense electric twilight, walking backwards on hands and feet, legs and arms stiff, down a huge jungle tree—as a creature neither inhuman nor superhuman but somehow both: a mysterious unkillable something, equally non primitive and uncivilized, or beyond time in the sense that emotion is beyond arithmetic...By the laws of its own structure, which are the irrevocable laws of juxtaposition and contrast, the revue is a use of everything trivial or plural to intensify what is singular and fundamental... Mlle. Josephine Baker.²⁵

For cummings, Baker's dancing body embodies the mystery and contrast of juxtaposition. His reading is rife with phallic and atavistic imagery that struggle against the technology of "a dense electric twilight" of the stage.²⁶ The binary logic that pervaded Levinson's French review reemerges in cummings' American praise of Baker's performance: again, she evokes a *something*—"a mysterious unkillable something"—that evades complete capture by either language or representation. cummings' review reverberates with the chase, if not ache, of searching and reaching, albeit poetically and in beautifully violent language, for a descriptor that can sequester this something that Baker's dancing body calls forth. At a loss, cummings resorts to terms such as "inhuman" and "superhuman"—two seemingly irreconcilable images that are not wholly appropriate or

unforgivably inappropriate, but whose marked contrast lends itself considerably in describing Baker's work.²⁷

Although both reviewers tried desperately to *describe* Baker's dancing body with a measure of certainty and authority, they succeeded best in revealing their own bafflement and how vulnerable the black female performing body was to the violent probing of discourse. With their mention of arched backs, protruding haunches, shuddering bodies and stiff appendages, the reviews openly demonstrate an intimacy with and expectant accessibility to Baker's body. Discursively retracing lines and curves, the reviewers are driven by and at the same time reconstitute the exuberance and spectacular nature of Baker's dancing body. In so doing, they cast Baker once more into the public eye. The stage, wings, and curtains of the theatre, and, for that matter, the glass enclosures of the museum, are no longer necessary, for Baker—and with her Baartman and the host of black women subjected to the violence of display and discourse—is called to perform on the page. She again becomes a body to be exhibited, a curio void of soul or story, reduced to the spectacle of display. Baker is rendered ghostly, unwittingly cast away by Levinson and Cummings to consort with all of the other improperly buried bodies that lingered in the ancestral burial ground of her dancing. Yet it is here within the throes of spectacle that the illusiveness of black suffering becomes most clear. Evasion might be an enduring quality of black suffering, but as Levinson's and Cummings' reviews suggested, *it refused to be left behind*, even in the din of white amusement.

La Baker: Exotic Puppet

To be sure, white male critics were not the only ones who offered such reviews. As my reading of Jane Nardal's commentary will show, Nardal was also wrestling with what it meant to live in an era and in a city that lauded and commodified black cultures and black bodies. Although the circumstances were different, Nardal shared many of the same views as Levinson and Cummings, shaped in part by her very French upbringing, yet veered sharply from them as a result of her budding black racial consciousness.

Born into an affluent, educated family in the French colony of Martinique, Nardal and her life story stand in stark contrast to the personal upbringing that Baker shares in her memoir. Whereas Baker struggled in school, Nardal was a stellar student and was among the first generation of Martinican women students to study in post World War I France. She was joined in Paris by her sisters Paulette, Andrée and Alice. The Paris that greeted them was a mournful, albeit vibrant post-war city. Set against and perhaps invigorated by the city's artistic and intellectual vibrancy, the young Nardal sisters soon garnered a reputation for hosting literary salons in their home, located at 7 rue Hébert in the Clamart suburb of Paris. The sisters brought writers together with artists, intellectuals with musicians, Africa with the United States and the Caribbean. In this regard, the Nardal sisters' salon—bilingual in communication, and peculiarly Anglophile in character (given their apartment's furnishings, and the English tea they served, as opposed to the rum, wine or coffee one might otherwise expect)—became a wellspring of ideas about black racial matters that defied linguistic, national, ethnic, racial and cultural borders.²⁸

The Nardal sisters' salons helped to propel and disseminate intellectual interests in global black humanism and solidarity. Jane found an outlet for her musings as a writer in emerging journals of the era that were produced by black intellectuals and that focused on race and culture in Paris and throughout the diaspora. She was a major contributor, for instance, to *La Dépêche africaine*, a Paris-based news publication that served as a means of correspondence “between Negroes of Africa, Madagascar, the Antilles, and America.”²⁹ Founded in 1928 and edited by Maurice Satineau from Guadeloupe, *La Dépêche africaine* was the major organ of the Comité de défense des intérêts de la race noire (CDIRN), a Paris-based organization dedicated to French colonial reform. Despite the disparate treatment of black communities from the United States, Africa and the Caribbean, and commodification of black cultures raging through the French capital, the journal and many of its contributors remained loyal to the French imperial project. Article submissions were driven by the idea that “the methods of colonization by civilized nations [were] far from perfect; but [that] colonization itself [was] a humane and necessary project.”³⁰

Nardal was a regular contributor to the journal, yet, unlike many of her colleagues at *La Dépêche africaine*, she was not a staunch colonial apologist. Although she believed that Negroes could benefit from the colonial project, she, as an affluent beneficiary of French culture and colonization who was privileged to study in France, was nonetheless coming into a racial awakening.³¹ Whereas Baker had been pushed to racial consciousness through her experience of the racial violence of the 1917 St. Louis Race Riots, Nardal's awakening was fueled in great part by her life in the French capital. For it was in Paris that she encountered other black communities from Africa and the United

States that had settled in the city following the war, and moved by the cultural interchanges, began to host salons and write for *La Dépêche africaine*. It was in these two veins that she came to better understand and articulate her budding racial consciousness, which she called *Internationalisme noir*.

“Black Internationalism,” was also the name of an article she wrote for the inaugural February 1928 issue of *La Dépêche Africaine*.³² In this article, she speaks optimistically about this vague sense that Negroes of all origins, nationalities, customs and religions felt that they belonged to a single and same race. She attributes this awakening racial consciousness in part to the war and the subsequent displacement and relocation of black communities from Africa, the Antilles and the United States in the French capital. She is well attuned to the presence and vogue of Negro art, sculpture, literature and music, and the force with which black performers impacted French cinema, theater, and the music hall—thanks, in part, to the demands and intrigue of white snobs. All these reasons, she argues, “must be taken into account to explain the birth among Negroes of a race spirit. Henceforth there would be some interest, some originality, some pride in being Negro, in *turning back* toward Africa, the cradle of Negroes, in *remembering a common origin*.”³³

Nardal is especially encouraged, and perhaps enthralled, by the work of black American writers and intellectuals. She cites works such as *The Souls of Black Folks* by W.E.B. Du Bois and *The New Negro* anthology edited by philosopher Alain Locke as prime examples of the “peculiar effect” of colonization and white domination. Despite the “obstacles they encountered (late emancipation, economic slavery still existing in the South, humiliations, lynchings),” she muses, black Americans had, nonetheless, responded

to white prejudice and “produced [among themselves] an unparalleled solidarity and race consciousness.”³⁴ On the contrary, the “Afro-Latins, in contact with a race less hostile to the man of color than the Anglo-Saxon race, have been for that reason retarded in this path.”³⁵ The differences between French (deemed to be less severe and more tolerant toward black cultures) and British colonial rule, she suggests, explains the heightened, “new internationalism” as well as their efforts “to recapture contact with the scattered peoples of African derivation.”³⁶ The racial awareness and maturity that she reads in DuBois and Locke stands in stark contrast, however, to the newness and relative timidity with which she and her Francophone sisters and brothers approach the subject of racial consciousness.

Nardal’s own timidity is most salient in her discussion of identity. Nardal certainly espouses a “black internationalism,” yet her budding racial awareness is tempered with a loving dedication to France and French culture. Even though her use of the term “Afro-Latins” as a marker of hybrid identity closely follows the terrains of W.E.B. DuBois’ “double consciousness,” “she shies away from anything approaching DuBois’s fierce condemnation of colonial exploitation and racism.”³⁷ Instead, she asserts, the timidity with which French-speaking blacks approach the question of racial consciousness “is a credit to the country that understood that it would try its best to assimilate them.”³⁸ She continues:

Even though [the loyalty of black French speakers] is reassuring, their love of the Latin country, the adoptive land, and their love of Africa, land of their ancestors, are not incompatible. The Negro spirit, so supple, so capable of assimilation, so discerning, will easily surmount this apparent difficulty.³⁹

Given what Nardal offers in this passage, her use of “Afro-Latin” gives voice to a political moderation that she shared with other contributors to *La Dépêche Africaine*.⁴⁰ She is clear:

her budding racial consciousness will not come at the expense of her love for her “adoptive country” and its culture. And, encouraged by black Americans like DuBois and Locke, who put the extensive training they received in prestigious educational institutions to work for the race, she too would serve the Afro-Latins, who stood to gain heartily from her contributions. “In tending to this task,” she continues:

formed in European methods, [she and other young black French speakers would] take advantage of these methods in order to study the spirit of their race, the past of their race with all the necessary critical verve. That black youth are already taking on the study of slavery, facing up to, with detachment, a past that is quite palpable and so painful—isn’t that the greatest proof that there does finally exist a black race, a race spirit on the path of maturity?⁴¹

By Nardal’s account, European methods, and the special power of literacy and writing, were paramount to the study of the black past. Geared with critical verve and a detachment that is clearly cultivated by the privileges of class and higher, specialized education, young black intellectuals such as herself could successfully and appropriately engage a past that was “quite palpable and so painful.” Here, the prevalence of reason, rather than the assumed racial gift of black passion and emotionalism, would be the more appropriate weapon to wield in their strivings toward a shared black past and global consciousness.

Given the praise of DuBois’ and Locke’s seminal tomes, Nardal clearly recognizes the written form, and its appeal to the intellect, as both fuel for and evidence of an emergent global black internationalism. Her attentiveness to writing—to fiction specifically—is again taken up in “Exotic Puppets” (“*Pantins Exotiques*”), published in the October issue of *La Dépêche africaine*. In this article, however, Nardal laments the way black women were exoticized in French colonial literature. She even recalls how the mere mention of Martinique—her island home—would magically transfigure her into one of

the “happy, carefree natives” from overseas France. She was, then, a living legend for many in the French capital, an illusion that had once been “profoundly anchored in the French mind [but which had] fallen from literature into the public domain.”⁴²

The illusion that Nardal refers to here—namely the exoticization of black colonial women, and their discursive entanglement with the motif of the tropical countryside—is reminiscent of the *doudou* trope that frequented French literature of the colonial era. The trope of the *doudou*, as scholar Richard Burton argues, is one of the primary mythological representations of the colonial relationship that came to prominence under the Third Republic. By the turn of the twentieth century, the trope had made its way into a subset of colonial literature that came to be known as *la littérature doudou* or *doudouisme*. By Burton’s account, the *doudou* manifested itself as “the smiling, sexually available black or colored woman (usually the latter) who gives herself heart, mind, and body to a visiting Frenchman (usually a soldier or colonial official) and is left desolate when her lover abandons her to return to France, having, of course, refused to marry her though often leaving her with a child who [would] at least ‘lighten the race’.”⁴³

But her exposition takes on a different tone with her mention of Josephine Baker, whose arrival on the Parisian entertainment scene changed everything. Nardal remarks:

Here it is that a woman of color leaps onstage with her shellacked hair and sparkling smile. She is certainly still dressed in feathers and banana leaves, but she brings to Parisians the latest Broadway products (the Charleston, jazz, etc.). The transition between past and present, the soldering between virgin forest and modernism, is what American blacks have accomplished and rendered tangible.

And the blasé artists and snobs find in them what they seek: the savorous, spicy contrast of primitive beings in an ultramodern frame of African frenzy unfurled in the cubist décor of a nightclub. This explains the unprecedented vogue and the swell of enthusiasm generated by a little *capresse* who was begging on the sidewalks of St. Louis (Mississippi) [sic].⁴⁴

In this passage, Nardal asserts that the metaphorical understandings of black colonial women move from the literature to the merriment and *vogue* of the Parisian nightclub. Nardal's dismissive reference to Baker as "*capresse*," a pejorative for people of mixed-race, and the way she allies Baker's career with the amusement of white blasé snobs do little to disguise her ambivalence about this move. As Nardal relays, Baker was little more than a character from the American writer Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926) and French writer Paul Morand's *Magie Noir* (1927)—two literary pieces that not only reduced Negroes to sorcery, fetishism, and cannibalism, but also depicted Negroes as ever toeing that line that would send them reeling back "to [their] instincts of superstition and magic."⁴⁵

Nardal's comment on Negroes' "instincts of superstition and magic," of course, is alluding to the myth of black atavism, or the presumption that the primitive was so deeply ingrained in the Negro that they were subject at any moment to return to their so-called "natural" state. Within a state of atavistic return, Negroes' inherent emotionalism or passion overwhelmed any declaration or practice of reason. I am unsure whether Nardal's allusion to black atavism is steeped in sarcasm, or incredulity that she might be counted among those who experience the atavistic return. She was, after all, a beneficiary of French upbringing, culture, education, and respectability, and to make a spectacle of oneself was paramount to cultural and class betrayal. Moreover, *unmaking the refined Negro into spectacle*—the ultimate blow to a European-inspired intellectualism based upon reason and detachment—would not only undermine the work toward global racial consciousness, it would also seem to be the domain of the white imagination.

Although Nardal could credit black Americans—and Baker particularly—with soldering the break between past and present, and the virgin forest and modernism, she was hard pressed to see how Baker’s popular performances, an example of unmaking the Negro into spectacle at its best, fulfilled the imperatives of black internationalism. Reclaiming a shared black past—real or imagined—by means of performance was unthinkable, for, as Nardal writes:

[Baker] and her friends (Joe Alex, Douglas Johnny, Hudgins), in the course of entertaining the Parisian public, offer new and truculent images for the [white] avant-garde writers. In hearing their sweet and [rowdy] melodies in concert, in the music hall, on records, these writers reconstitute a strange atmosphere where one still hears something reminiscent of the wailing of poor slaves with an aftertaste of naïvete and now and then savagery. Thus, in modern, exotic literature, the poetic imagination loses none of its prerogatives, even when it no longer awards the prize for excellence to good “Uncle Toms.”⁴⁶

By Nardal’s account, Baker (and her friends) offered only “new and truculent images” for the very community of writers whose literature reduced black people to superstition and magic. So enraptured were these writers by Baker’s spectacular performances that they could even reconstitute “something reminiscent of the wailing of poor slaves” simply upon hearing the “sweet melodies” by Baker and her friends! Resonances of the black past could only be connected with performance in and as a result of the white avant-garde writers’ poetic imagination. To her dismay and utter frustration, the black past that DuBois and Locke had so carefully, deliberately, and resolutely begun to construct—the past to which Nardal hoped to contribute—was incongruent with the past that white writers discerned in Baker’s performances. Whereas DuBois and Locke wrote tomes that praised black contributions to culture and history, white writers only exoticized blackness, subjecting it to their fancy and desire at the expense of black humanity. Thus performance, as the site of inspiration for these white writers, was too precarious and the

limits of its interpretation too open to engage in any serious examination of the black past. Performing before not to mention consorting with these writers was paramount to race betrayal.⁴⁷

Apparently, Jane was not the only Nardal who had concerns about Baker's dance performances. Her sister Paulette, also a contributor to black intellectual journals circulating in interwar Paris, shared Jane's distrust of Baker's work. More recently, Guadeloupean author and literary critic Maryse Condé addressed this distrust, albeit from the perspective of Paulette, in the lecture "Body and Soul: Josephine, Jane and Paulette."⁴⁸ Condé is disturbed that Paulette dismissed or did not interact with Baker, and deduces that is for one of three reasons: First, Paulette is indeed an intellectual snob who "looked down upon a girl who was dancing with a banana belt in a Revue at the Folie Bergères."⁴⁹ She concludes, though, that Paulette must be much more intelligent than this, and moves on. Second, Paulette was a good Catholic girl, who was not interested in "a woman who was half-naked on the stage, who was singing a very deviant song," but in more meaningful, religious music, such as Negro spirituals.⁵⁰ But, Condé reasons, if Paulette was truly a music lover—as was Baker—then she would have been intrigued by all music, including popular music to which Baker performed. Dissatisfied with this option, she finally proposes that "Paulette certainly believed Josephine was a creation of white folk." She was, therefore, unauthentic, and consequently dangerous given the way she "betrayed" black heritage.

Although Condé writes about Paulette, her comments lead us to a concern that Jane signals toward, but does not express forthrightly: the matter of authenticity. Whereas Jane (and Paulette) had created an international black community through their salons,

Baker had moved further and further away from Montmartre, the home base of black popular culture in Paris, soon after her arrival in the city. The jazz that she danced to in her Parisian debut was replaced entirely in less than a decade by Offenbach symphonies and the deep blues that she hoped to sing one day were replaced by light opera, for example, in her 1934 run of *La Creole*.⁵¹ Although it seems that the Nardal sisters would have gravitated toward a young Baker who was evolving into sophistication, they were concerned more with Baker's transition *away* from black people and culture, her movement *toward* white tastes and approval, and her desire to marry a white man, as a measure of the ultimate triumph of love over race and racism. Baker's perceived flight from blackness might well have included her flight from herself, given that she spent thirty minutes every morning rubbing [her] body with half a lemon to lighten [her] skin and just as long preparing a mixture for [her] hair."⁵² All things considered, Baker was a racial counterfeit, an exotic puppet—neither of which the Nardal sisters could tolerate in their quest for black global unification.

Both Nardals made it very clear: the stakes were much too high and the currency of the black body was much too valuable to waste in the political milieu of interwar Paris. Rather than unmake themselves into spectacle as Baker did, the Nardals chose to embrace the intellect and writing as its most prized symbol. For both women intellectuals, the materiality and fallibility of the black dancing body were cause for alarm in an era when white artists and snobs so carelessly traded black humanity for the shell of a black body that could then be used for their personal pleasure and discretion. This was not acceptable to the Nardals who worked so hard to write black people into history. As I illustrated in the previous section, Baker's past—and the past terror that other black

women had also endured—was there, lurking within the spectacle of her dancing body. Yet the Nardals, committed as they were to the project of racial consciousness, could not see—*could not afford to see*—the shared past that lingered in Baker’s dance. What remained for the Nardals was their distrust of Baker the performer, Baker’s body, Baker’s penchant and deep need for white love and approval, and the Bakermania that she incited—a deep suspicion that found solace only in their “modern” embrace of text and reason, and their faith that black internationalism, a global movement in black consciousness, would accomplish its goal.

La Baker: No Rest for the Weary

*“Where does history rest, if at all? And how is history reawakened and put into motion?
How is it that it finds its grounding, its pacing, its anatomy?”*⁵³

In Baker’s 1935 French film entitled *Princess Tam Tam*, she is cast as the North African shepherdess Aouina who becomes the toast of Paris as the pretend Indian Princess Tam Tam. The film tells the story of Aouina’s interactions with a French writer, Max, who has traveled to “Africa,” laden with the hope that the simple “African” life will allay his insistent writer’s block, and offer relief from his troubled marriage. Aouina’s rambunctious, cheery personality, not to mention her doe-eyed affection, offers Max just enough female presence to fill the void left by his estranged wife. Caught between her wanting for this sophisticated Frenchman, and the Frenchman’s desire to produce the next best seller, Aouina finds herself in a “civilizing experiment,” amid a Pygmalion-and-Galatea-like process in which she is transformed from a street-savvy urchin into a chic, civilized young woman. Several months later, Max whisks a newly civilized Aouina to Paris, where, to his obvious delight, and according to his plan to make his wife jealous,

Aouina—rather, Princess Tam Tam—quickly becomes the sweetheart of Parisian high society. Max’s estranged wife Lucie learns of the farce and plans a party where she will expose Princess Tam Tam for the savage that she is. This string of events climaxes in a conga performance in which Baker’s character dances to the onlooker’s delight, wrecklessly and sensually undoing all of Max’s attempts at civilization. The rigid, contained elegance of lamé, high heels and jewelry that Princess Tam Tam arrives in are impulsively thrown off and, in response to the pounding rhythms of an African drum, she, as Robert Farris Thompson would say, “gets down,” and gives Parisian high society a performance that they will never forget.⁵⁴

Scholars of various disciplines have offered multiple readings of this scene over the past two decades, often calling attention to the way Baker’s dancing body becomes the place where the preoccupations of colonialism, modernism, capitalism, racial and gender agency collide. But as literary scholar Mae G. Henderson, dance critic Andre Lepecki, and culture critic Margo Jefferson insist, Baker’s dance performances take on new and special meanings when considered as a sampling of Africanist dance traditions, and with a sensitivity to and compassion for the trauma, dislocation, loss and survival that her diasporic sampling communicates.⁵⁵ Baker’s clever melding of Africanist dance vernaculars in this conga scene presents an opportunity to take on this charge.

Moreover, and aligning with the goal in this chapter, the conga scene urges us to summon the ghostly—or the peculiar circulation and pooling of black cultures, histories, bodies, and stories that lurk beneath the spectacle of her dancing body. Summoning the ghostly, however, is to return to the matter of visibility. As I have shown already in my readings of Levinson, Cummings, and Nardal, the exuberance of Baker’s performances

overwhelmed their capacity to see the past pain and terror that lingered in her dance. The example of their readings illustrate how visibility, as Gordon offers in *Ghostly Matters*, “is a complex system of permission and prohibition, of presence and absence, punctuated alternately by apparitions and hysterical blindness.”⁵⁶ Rendering their critique of Baker’s work through the lens of colonialism, postcolonialism, and black internationalism, Levinson, cummings, and Nardal could only see what these lenses allowed. Whatever lies outside of this framing is rendered invisible, even negligible. Because of their cultural priming, they are

led to believe not only that everything can be seen, but also that everything is available and accessible for [their] consumption. In [cultures] seemingly ruled by technologies of hypervisibility, [they] are led to believe that neither repression nor the return of the repressed, in the form of either improperly buried bodies or countervailing systems of value or difference, occurs with any meaningful result.⁵⁷

Although this passage comes from Avery Gordon’s comments on hypervisibility in the United States, it aptly applies to the three critics I discussed in the preceding section. Baker’s performances were so spectacular and her critics were so primed by their cultural positions that they allowed themselves to be convinced that a black past does not exist if they could not see it: for, as Gordon asserts, our social conditioning leads us to think that everything is attainable or accessible to us through the technologies of hypervisibility. Levinson, cummings, and Nardal are, in fact, so interpolated into this mode of thinking that they neither pay nor *can* pay attention to what is masked or drowned out by the hypervisibility of spectacle *or* by their own overwhelmed visuality. Moreover, they are hard-pressed to care or think carefully about what is being repressed, or what a return of the repressed might incur for their critiques.

Gordon's observations align with the trajectory of scholarship that deals with Baker and performance of the interwar period, generally. Relegating Baker's work and that of her contemporaries to the realm of race spectacle belies the depth of their work and the theatrical power of the dance, theatrical, and film stage. To end the analysis here—to read Baker only as the hypervisible spectacle that fulfilled the needs of her predominantly white viewership—enacts a kind of violence that further marginalizes an already largely excluded past. The hope to remedy this exclusion, however, incites what Gordon has called a “something to be done” and demands a way to at once read the past as a part of, and in dialogue with Baker's productions, *and* to read Baker's work as a documentation of that encounter. We are charged then to probe this spectacle of hypervisibility for what lurks beneath and what is rendered invisible by its noise.

To attune to the racket of hypervisibility, we must first heed Edouard Glissant's observation that “din is discourse.”⁵⁸ We must engage the visual noise of spectacle so that the “distinctions between permission and prohibition, presence and absence” become discernible. In so doing, we step fully into those pauses between remembering and forgetting, enabling and repressing/suppressing, and see that the obsession with reading Baker—and black performance generally—as spectacle is but a substitute for dealing with the immaterial, lingering presence of the past, as well as the stories, bodies, sounds, feelings implicit in that past. We are thus invited to confront the exuberance of Baker's performances as a symptom of the inability to deal with a weighty past that remains unmourned and ungrieved. It is to return to the ancestral grounds and find them awaiting our intercession.

A closer investigation of the dance performance in *Princess Tam Tam* offers the opportunity to think about this in musical and choreographic terms. By the time the climactic scene opens, Max and Aouina (rather Aouina *as* Princess Tam Tam) are at a high society party planned by Max's wife Lucie, who hopes that Aouina will return to her primitive nature—that is, to her instincts of magic and superstition, as Nardal might comment in disgust and dismay—once the drumming begins. Viewers are face-to-face with a black skinned, shirtless man initiating a call on a conga drum. Although his voice has been overridden by the sound of the drumbeat, we see his mouth move in what appears to be an animated song. Aouina is soon as intoxicated by the drumming as she is by the alcohol, and is interpolated by the drum's rhythmic call. Suddenly, the rhythmic drumming gives way to an up-tempo, polyrhythm, over which an almost lazy, steady melody arises.⁵⁹ White chorines take their position on the stage, some of whom engage in a very gentle version of what will follow in Aouina's conga, while Aouina looks on in enraptured delight.

“How can you resist that music?” Lucie's friend asks her. “Come on, dance. You know, like the other night. Come on, dance!” The friend's prodding, compounded by the influence of the alcohol, accomplishes its task, for Aouina stands, removes her hairpiece and jewelry, and to the utter embarrassment of Max and his comic sidekick, leaps over the banister that separates her from the stage. She then tosses her shoes aside, her bare feet connecting with the ground. She winds down the stairs, and in order to “get down” removes the lamé that covered her body. Aouina now stands before the white partygoers clad in a sheer black dress, her legs revealed, her body ready to perform. The partygoers look on in stupefied wonder, much too sophisticated to participate, yet much too enticed

to be disgusted, and much too intrigued to look away. Even the white chorines move aside and in fact have a seat at her feet as Aouina takes off into a conga. The conga has a heavy fourth beat that Aouina responds to in various ways. Her kicks and momentary pelvic undulations are rendered with dynamic ease, a key characteristic of Africanist dance.⁶⁰ With the final beat of the drum and Tam Tam's triumphant finishing pose, the audience erupts into applause to Max's and Coton's surprise and to Lucie's humiliation. The audience rushes the stage and carries a spent Tam Tam off the stage. In less than two minutes, Tam Tam disrupted the party's sophisticated ambience, but apparently to no real harm: given the smiling faces, their vicarious excursions to the reaches of black dance was well worth the disruption.

When writing about her work in *Princess Tam Tam*, Baker discusses how central the dance was to the production and how special it was for her. She recalls:

One of the things I particularly enjoyed about filming Princess Tam Tam was the chance to introduce the conga to France. Not that the conga had anything to do with Tunisia [which is where they filmed the movie]; it was a dance enjoyed by the slaves after their work was done. We were all convinced that it would be the rage in Paris that winter. What better way to keep warm?⁶¹

This passage is important for two particular reasons: one, for the quiet reemergence of her childhood in St. Louis; and two, for the way Baker signals toward the power and the force with which black cultures circulated the globe during this period. Regarding the first point, Baker does not give readers a sense of what inspired her to perform this particular dance, except that she was sure it would be all the rage in Paris that winter. Her question "What better way to keep warm?" reads as characteristic mischief, but could also be read as glib sarcasm and as another invitation to further mine her words. As I mentioned in the introduction, Baker lived an impoverished life as a child in St. Louis. She and her siblings

often stole coal in order to turn right around to sell it to make money for the family.⁶² More often than not, they had to use coal sacks as shoes. As Baker's sister Margaret reports, Baker, determined to be an entertainer, would dance and organize shows for the neighborhood children. "Dancing was in her blood," Margaret remembered. "Can't you sit still," she would ask her sister, to which Baker would retort: "This is the best way I know to keep warm."⁶³ An ocean, culture, lifetime, and mega career later, the past rears its head in her mention of the conga *as a way to keep warm*, marking both her rise to fame and ironically the past from which she tried to escape *by* dancing.

Baker's reliance on dance as a means of escape or relief is part of a larger tradition among black cultures, which leads to the second point of importance in her passage. Although she does not approximate the conga with a particular country or community, her use of the word "slaves" becomes the shorthand for the dispersal and movement of black people as chattel throughout the world. Her explanation that the conga was a dance enjoyed by the slaves after their work was done is a telling one that offers insight into the function and possibilities of diasporic dance. Unlike Nardal, who offered no substantial study of Baker's dance or performance in her article "Exotic Puppets," Baker clearly recognized the conga and dance generally as an integral part of enslaved life. Moreover, she also recognized its redeeming qualities, or its capacity to offer something of use—comfort, community, a measure of rootedness—after a day of toil and forced labor. Baker (wittingly or not) suggests that dance brings with it a measure of reflection, and serves as a means of untangling the events of our lives. Dance, her comments offer, carries the power of narrative.⁶⁴

The example of Baker's dancing illustrates how performance calls forth and threads together the remnants of experience that the performer may or may not have experienced first hand. Through its narrative power, performance not only sends the performer back to the ancestral burial grounds, but also establishes the agency of the past. Captured on film as an exuberant dance, her performance of the conga is a yielding to and conversing with the howls, sobs and cries of terror that reside in the ancestral burial grounds. And, there, amid the throes of the conga, Baker experiences what Suzan-Lori Parks would call "the old world way of getting to the deep shit."⁶⁵ That is, she experiences how dance does not stand in opposition to reason, but becomes its own mode of reasoning. She experiences how a past that is supposed to be passed enacts its own return—or as Julie Dash's character Miz Emma Julia from *Dawtuh Island* would say *comes back to we*—again and again and again. And Baker experiences how dance gathers a community of people, stories, suffering who otherwise would not come together, or would not otherwise be acknowledged. All of these demonstrate the obscenity of performance in the way that it reignites past pains, the persistence of the dead, and the redemption of the both of them.⁶⁶

Thus there is weaponry in the dance. For in her contested dance lies a kinesthetic memorial. Baker's performance of the conga locates the ancestral burial ground and choreographs a story that is, as author Toni Morrison might say, too terrible to pass on. A viewer will recall how Max and his sidekick turn in shame, hide their faces, certainly from Tam Tam's wreckless antics, but perhaps, from the history that is too terrible to behold, too awful and heavy to pass on. The various chapters of the black past—from forceful capture and the Middle Passage, through the forced labor in the New World—pool and

gather in Baker's conga performance. Whereas a story becomes itself in its telling, dance—as Baker's comments have taught us already—*divines*: it becomes the harmonizing force that threads disparate stories and histories together across time and space. Dance allows us into the uncanny, yet oddly cohesive, clamor of the past. Dance wrestles with a past that just won't quit. Therefore it is through the medium of dance by way of Baker's dancing body that the transient albeit sedimentary quality of the past finds its grounding, its pacing, its anatomy.

Chapter 1 (Baker) Notes

¹ Josephine Baker and Jo Bouillon, *Josephine*, 1.

² Baker and Bouillon 2.

³ Baker and Bouillon 3.

⁴ Baker and Bouillon 2.

⁵ Baker and Bouillon 3.

⁶ Baker and Bouillon 5.

⁷ Baker did not play in the 1921 Broadway premier of Sissle and Blake's *Shuffle Along* because she was only fifteen years old and too young to play in the production. However, she did join the show when it played in Boston, and later joined the Broadway cast when she turned 16. The humor and overall success she brought to the show led Sissle and Blake in 1924 to write in a special part for her in their *Chocolate Dandies*, in which she was billed as the comedy girl. For more, see Rose, Phyllis' *Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Time*.

⁸ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 23.

⁹ Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 127.

¹⁰ Baker and Bouillon 71. Josephine insists that she has an intelligent derriere. She scoffs at the many people whose bottoms are only good enough to sit on, thus suggesting a certain kind of body intelligence, and, more specifically, a cognizance of the way her body was read within the context of the Parisian metropole by her white viewers.

¹¹ Historian Tyler Edward Stovall speaks more about the impact of black American culture in the French capital in his seminal text *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light*.

¹² *Les années folles*, literally the "crazy years," refers to the French equivalent of the era known in the United States as *The Roaring Twenties*. For more on Baker as an iconographic figure of this era, and how she was recorded in popular visual art, see Karen C. C. Dalton and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Josephine Baker and Paul Colin: African American Dance Seen through Parisian Eyes."

¹³ Dalton and Gates, "Josephine Baker and Paul Colin," 903.

¹⁴ For more on the changing notions of gender and womanhood in the French capital, see Whitney Chadwick and Tirza True Latimer, eds. *The Modern Woman Revisited: Paris Between the Wars*. The introductory chapter, "Becoming Modern: Gender and Sexual Identity after World War I," penned by Chadwick and Latimer offers historical context for the emergence of the modern woman in the French capital. Historian Tyler Stovall also has a chapter in this collection that speaks specifically about the ways African American communities in Paris informed changing notions of gender, race and miscegenation, pp 21-33.

¹⁵ Baker and Bouillon, *Josephine*, 102.

¹⁶ Baker and Bouillon, *Josephine*, 101.

¹⁷ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 23. Hartman traces this understanding of the black body back to the systematic commodification of the black body in enslavement.

¹⁸ The notion that the black body is both discursively constructed and read is an idea that literary critic Hortense Spillers explores in her discussion of the flesh and the body. See Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." Brenda Dixon Gottschild similarly explores the discursive and cultural production of the black body, but within the particular lens of American dance and performance, and offers the idea of the *black dancing body*. Scholars in the field of dance and in theatrical history have returned to her idea in order to talk about the ways in which race and racism not only mark the body (read as a kind of ghosting), but similarly shape the ways in which the black dancer or performer is read or perceived. In this regard, the black dancing body is the site at which conceptual or phenomenal constructions of blackness meet with the materiality of the black physical body. See Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*. See also Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*; Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*; Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*.

¹⁹ Critical responses to the Baker's performances in the show were steeped in racist language. Jo Bouillon includes a summary of these reviews in *Josephine*, 103-104. Phyllis Rose offers a discussion of out-of-town and New York reviews of Baker's role in the 1936 Zigfield Follies. Rose also identifies two of Baker's responses to the onslaught of stinging reviews: "One was to say, in effect, I am not black, I am French. The other was to say, I am black and I will take refuge from these insults with my people" (171). Both responses raised numerous responses of their own. For more, see Rose's *Jazz Cleopatra*, 168-174.

²⁰ T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting argues this point in *Black Venus*, 32-41, 105-118.

²¹ Eerily, Baartman did become a collection of sexual parts, when after her death she was dissected and her genitals were displayed in Paris' Musée de l'Homme. Sharpley-Whiting argues that the mortem and post-mortem exhibition of Baartman's body was not completely different from Baker's own exhibition as a performer in Paris' interwar years. While she recognizes the two instances were different perhaps in the degree of agency Baker was able to enact in her own exhibition, she argues that little more distinguishes the two. In fact, she argues that Baker was but a twentieth century reiteration of the nineteenth century "Hottentot Venus." For more, see Sharpley-Whiting's the Introduction and the chapter "Cinematic Venus in the Africanist Orient" in *Black Venus*.

For a thorough examination of the ways in which black female bodies were central to and necessary for formulations of difference and justifications for European colonization in Africa, see also Sander Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*.

²² This position is exemplified in the work of Tyler Stovall. See "The New Woman and the New Empire: Josephine Baker and Changing Views of Femininity in Interwar France," n.p.

²³ This idea is exemplified in "Josephine Baker and La Revue Nègre: From Ethnography to Performance," an earlier article published by Mae G. Henderson. A more recent article by Henderson begins to sketch out new ways of considering Baker's work, particularly through the lens of diaspora, which has been extremely useful in writing this chapter. See "Colonial, Postcolonial, and Diasporic readings of Josephine Baker as Dancer and Performance Artist," *S&F Online* (2007). Using reviews from Baker's contemporary era, critic Terri J. Gordon mines the French reception of Baker's work. These reviews also are steeped in colonial language, in which Baker is viewed as an imported breath from the jungle, as a dishonor to the French music hall, and everything in between. See Terri J. Gordon, "Synesthetic Rhythms: African American Music and Dance Through Parisian Eyes."

²⁴ Levinson, *André Levinson on Dance*, 73. Levinson did not write this critique in response to Baker's performance in *Princess Tam Tam*, although it does offer a sense of his response to her dance performances, generally.

²⁵ e.e. cummings, "Vive la Folie!" 162-163. Originally published in *Vanity Fair*, 1926.

²⁶ Literary critic Mae Gwendolyn Henderson deftly illustrates this idea in her article on Josephine Baker and perceptions of her work from French, U.S. and diasporic perspectives. See Henderson's "Colonial, Postcolonial, and Diasporic Readings of Josephine Baker."

²⁷ Certainly, Levinson and Cummings were not alone in their deliberations. Other reviewers from the era similarly encountered the difficulty of describing Baker's body as well as the body of her performance work. Consider, for instance, the work of journalist Janet (Genet) Flanner, who worked as the Paris correspondent for *The New Yorker* magazine from 1925 until her retirement in 1975. Flanner was actually in the French capital when Baker played in *Revue Nègre*. In her November 1925 "Letter from Paris," Flanner wrote timidly about the show's debut, praising everything from the sets by Covarrubias, to the "tuneless and stunningly orchestrated" music, to Baker's "stomach dance." Years later, however, Flanner writes in the introduction to a 1972 collection of her Paris correspondence that her review of the show was written "timidly, uncertainly, and like a dullard" (xx). But, she recalled, the show was such a hit and such a novelty that Baker still remained "like a still-fresh vision, sensual, exciting, and isolated in [her] memory" nearly fifty years after the fact (xx). So, apparently not wishing to lose another opportunity to recount such a spectacular event, she writes a "belated tribute" to Baker and her Colored Revue. It is here—a half century later, amid the "Black is Beautiful" sentiment of the 1970s—that Flanner writes: "[Josephine] made her entry entirely nude except for a pink flamingo feather between her limbs; she was being carried upside down and doing the split on the shoulder of a black giant. Midstage he paused, and with his long fingers holding her basket-wise around the waist swung her in a slow cartwheel to the stage floor, where she stood, like his magnificent discarded burden, in an instance of complete silence. She was an unforgettable female ebony statue. A scream of salutation spread through the theater. Whatever happened next was unimportant. The two specific elements had been established and were unforgettable—her magnificent dark body, a new model that to the French proved for the first time that black was beautiful, and the acute response of the white masculine public in the capital of hedonism of all Europe—Paris" (xx-xxi). In Flanner's words, Baker still holds the latency of an ebony statue. Yet she also describes Baker as a "discarded burden"—a magnificent dark body—that transforms a hitherto (presumed) unpalatable blackness into a something beautiful that elicits a particularly "acute response" among her white male viewers. Even in her belated tribute, Flanner sees Baker and describes her body within a framework of white male pleasure and desire. I am intrigued at how easily Flanner reverts back to the primitivist language that characterizes Levinson's and Cummings' reviews nearly fifty years before. See her original review of *Revue Nègre* in the November 1925 edition of *The New Yorker*. See also her belated tribute in *Paris Was Yesterday, 1925-1939*, xx-xxi.

Also, in a collection of short stories by French writer Paul Morand, Baker is conjured in the figure of Sophie Taylor, the main character of the short story "Congo." Taylor, nicknamed Congo, shares many of the same qualities as Baker, many of which are revealed to the reader through the same language used by Levinson and Cummings. See "Congo" in Paul Morand's collection of short stories *Black magic*.

²⁸ Brent Hayes Edwards explores the concurrent developments of black feminism and black internationalism in interwar Paris in *The Practice of Diaspora*, 119-186.

²⁹ T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 25.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 20.

³² The article was originally titled: "L'Internationalisme noir." All references to Nardal's articles come from Sharpley-Whiting's English translations of Nardal's French texts offered in her book *Negritude Women*, 105-107.

³³ Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 106, emphasis mine.

³⁴ Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 107.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Alain LeRoy Locke, *The New Negro*, originally published in 1925, 14-15.

³⁷ Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 20.

³⁸ Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 107.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 20.

⁴¹ Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 107.

⁴² Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 108.

⁴³ Burton, “Maman-France Doudou,” 14.

⁴⁴ Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 109.

⁴⁵ Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 111.

⁴⁶ Sharpley-Whiting, *Negritude Women*, 109.

⁴⁷ I raise this point because others scholars have struggled with this very complex question—the question of the place of black women in discussions of black interwar culture and advancement, and the false divides between popular (particularly popular performance) and intellectual cultures. For more, see Sharpley-Whiting’s *Negritude Women* and Edwards’ *The Practice of Diaspora*.

⁴⁸ Condé presented her lecture, “Body and Soul: Josephine, Jane and Paulette,” at the Fall 2006 conference “Josephine Baker: a Century in the Spotlight” held at Barnard College. Like Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Brent Hayes Edwards, Condé is also concerned about the place of black women in black interwar intellectual culture, and, particularly, the struggle among Africana women to articulate and resolve the supposed divides between popular performance and intellectual cultures. Video of Condé’s lecture can be found at: http://barnard.edu/sfonline/baker/conde_01.htm. Citations are taken from the lecture transcript, which is accessible through this stable URL: http://barnard.edu/sfonline/baker/pdf/Maryse_Conde.pdf

⁴⁹ Condé, “Body and Soul,” 6.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Baker and Bouillon, *Josephine*, 95-98. See also Rose, *Jazz Cleopatra*, 164-165.

⁵² Baker and Bouillon, *Josephine*, 58.

⁵³ Lepecki, “The Melancholic Dance of the Postcolonial Spectral,” 106.

⁵⁴ In the chapter “African Art and Motion,” art historian Robert Farris Thompson describes the “get down quality” of African art, music, and dance, which refers to the proclivity in these art forms to favor the “descending direction,” or the heavier movements or tones that strive to align with earth rhythms. By his account, the “get down quality” is a common, identifiable characteristic across artistic disciplines, 13-14. The “get down quality” is also identifiable in Baker’s conga sequence, and is evidenced, too, in her literal descent down a flight of stairs to finally dance on the earth-most level. See Baker’s conga scene online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ag-yGpGpkOI>

⁵⁵ I am borrowing “Africanist” here from dance critic and historian Brenda Dixon Gottschild, which she uses to mean African-derived dance, or dance that has identifiable African diasporic characteristics, such as those described by Robert Farris Thompson in “African Art and Motion.” For more on the Africanist aesthetic in American dance and performance, see Gottschild’s *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*.

⁵⁶ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 15.

⁵⁷ Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 16.

⁵⁸ Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 128.

⁵⁹ I want to acknowledge Paul Anderson and Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof for helping me to break down the music during the early stages of my research on Baker's conga scene.

⁶⁰ Both Robert Farris Thompson and Brenda Dixon Gottschild discuss dynamic ease as a characteristic of African(ist) dance. See Thompson's "African Art and Motion" and Gottschild's *Digging the Africanist Presence*.

⁶¹ Baker and Bouillon, *Josephine*, 84. Although Baker does not approximate the conga with any particular country, my own research has shown that the composer of the conga was Eliseo Grenet, an exiled Cuban musician who, after leaving Cuba, worked in the entertainment industry in Spain and later in Paris. We wouldn't necessarily know this, for Eliseo's name was listed incorrectly on the film credit. Baker does not suggest in her memoir that she ever met Eliseo, or that they discussed the conga. In fact, aside from this quote, there is relatively little in her memoir about her work in *Princess Tam Tam*.

⁶² Baker and Bouillon, *Josephine*, 8-9.

⁶³ Baker and Bouillon, *Josephine*, 14.

⁶⁴ Baker clearly understood that the conga had nothing to do with Tunisia. At the same time, Baker's decision to dance the conga raises questions about the presence of the conga in the French metropole during the interwar period. What provided impetus for the conga craze? Particularly, how might it have made its way into *Princess Tam Tam*?

In her essay "Disciplining Josephine Baker," Kathryn Kalinak insists that the conga was a specifically Brazilian dance form which borrowed "its name from the long cylindrical conga drum and its characteristic rhythm from slave dances traditionally performed to celebrate the end of the workday" (326). While it may indeed be true that there is a relationship between Brazil and the conga that was disseminated internationally in the interwar era, it appears that the musical source that inspired the conga scene in *Princess Tam Tam* was Afro-Cuban in origin. This suspicion was not immediately confirmed by the film credits: not only are the African drummers omitted from the credits, the only credited musical contributor is listed as "Grenet."

In his book *Nationalizing Blackness: Afro-Cubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana*, cultural historian Robin Moore discusses a Cuban musician named Grenet within the context of the conga craze in the 1930s. Moore attributes the international fate of the conga to Eliseo Grenet (1893-1950), a White-skinned Cuban composer/pianist who is recognized as the central figure in the international conga craze. Grenet was born in Havana and by age sixteen had written and directed Afro-Cuban-inspired compositions. Despite the fact that the political and economic repression spurred many artists and performers to flee their island home, Grenet had no desires to leave; nonetheless, he was forced to do so in 1932 when his song "*Lamento cubano*" was judged subversive by government authorities. He moved to Madrid, where it is thought he was the first to adopt conga drums into his stage performances, a still highly controversial act, nonetheless one that was distinct in its incorporation of African-style hand drumming (79).

Grenet later moved to Paris in 1934, a move that was likely spurred by the degree of Parisian acceptance and reception of jazz and the African-inspired primitivism. In this milieu, Grenet created a successful niche for himself, and introduced consciously-reinvented comparsa music for the French ballroom, simplifying and formalizing the choreography to make it more accessible to the European public. He introduced the new salon conga to influential dance teachers from around Paris, received extensive media coverage and a popularization of conga within a few days. Grenet was quite successful during these years and wrote a number of Afro-Cuban-inspired compositions for Mexican, Argentinean and United States films in the 1930s, among them *La princesa tin-tan* with Josephine Baker (180). Given that Baker never appeared in an American film, I assume Moore is referring to the conga composition in *Princess Tam Tam*, which was produced in the 1935. Given this scenario, I am inclined to trace an Afro-Cuban influence on this particular conga scene. By Moore's account, the widespread appeal of salon conga in Paris was short-lived, and lasted only a few years, owing in part to the outbreak of World War II and the invasion of France by Germany. Despite its grim end on the entertainment circuit, the Afro-Cuban inspired conga would be forever recorded—however tame or formalized for the European audience—on Baker's dancing body.

⁶⁵ Suzan-Lori Parks, "from Elements of Style," in *The America Play, and Other Works*, 15.

⁶⁶ Margo Jefferson presented a lecture, “Body and Soul: Josephine, Jane and Paulette,” at the Fall 2006 conference “Josephine Baker: a Century in the Spotlight” held at Barnard College. Video of Jefferson’s lecture can be found at: http://barnard.edu/sfonline/baker/jefferson_01.htm. Transcripts of the lecture may be found at: http://barnard.edu/sfonline/baker/pdf/Margo_Jefferson.pdf; the following quote is taken from the transcript. In the words of Margo Jefferson, Baker encourages us to “watch and listen for all the ways she [used] her body, voice, imagination; history, geography, [and] culture to speak” (1). Baker’s dancing, as Jefferson continues, “becomes ‘a mobile army of metaphors’ calling up Africa, the Caribbean, America, and Europe” (2). At the same time, Baker’s dancing takes on the quality of archive, or something that Diana Taylor refers to as an “act of transfer,” a transmission of diasporic knowledge, memory and identity (50). See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Finally, Baker’s performance of the conga also becomes, as Joseph Roach purports in *Cities of the Dead* about dance generally, a way of thinking through the “otherwise unthinkable” (27), perhaps much like the slaves that Baker mentions who danced the conga after a day of work. Joseph Roach situates dance as an art of memory, a social, kinesthetic process of forgetting deployed in the larger project of cultural memory. In this regard, Baker’s dancing can be seen as an art of memory, that is, as a kinesthetic memorial to those who rest uneasily in the ancestral burial ground.

CHAPTER 2

Katherine Dunham and the Story of Every One of Them

*This is the story of no actual lynching in the southern states of America
and still it is the story of every one of them...*

*And though I have not smelled the smell of burning flesh, and have never seen a black body
swaying from a southern tree, I have felt these things in spirit, and finally through the creative
artist comes the need of the person to show this thing to the world, hoping that by so exposing the
ill the conscience of the many will protest and save further destruction and humiliation.*

—Katherine Dunham, Choreographer-Anthropologist

By the time choreographer-anthropologist Katherine Dunham (1909-2006) would have heard about the execution of Willie McGee on May 8, 1951, by the state of Mississippi, she might well have been following the case for several years.¹ McGee was charged with raping a white woman, Willette Hawkins, in 1943, and after conviction was sentenced to death in 1945. McGee spent approximately eight years in a Mississippi prison before his execution, during which time his case became a righteous cause among civil rights workers and organizations, the American Communist Party, and noted celebrities, including the music hall performer Josephine Baker.² Only two years before in 1949, seven young black men, six of whom were minors, were also convicted of raping a white woman in Martinsville, Virginia. The young men, who would become known in the press as the Martinsville Seven, were executed by the state of Virginia on February 2, 1951. Despite the overwhelming show of support to overturn their sentences, eight black

men were executed within the span of three months in connection with the rape of a white woman.

The deaths, or “legal lynchings” of Willie McGee and the Martinsville Seven in 1951 marked the end to two highly publicized legal dramas and also elucidated the failures and inconsistencies of the U.S. legal system.³ The defense uncovered one such inconsistency during the Martinsville Seven appeals process, when they presented statistics that forty-five black men had been executed by the state of Virginia for the rape of white women since 1908. In contrast, not one white man had ever received the death penalty for that crime.⁴ By using these statistics, the defense called forth the longstanding triangulation between prevailing stereotypes about the black male as rapist, the virtue of white women, and the (socially and culturally pardoned or less harshly punished) improprieties of white men—a triangulation that was readily and historically associated with lynching.⁵ With this empirical support, the defense established that black men were disproportionately sentenced to death for the same or similar crimes for which white men received less harsh sentences; furthermore, they also seeded the idea that black men were not equally protected or prosecuted under the law. As a result, Katherine Dunham was led “to believe that there was no fairness in the judiciary system.”⁶

Many others shared Dunham’s sentiments. As the list of supporters in the opening paragraph illustrates, McGee and Martinsville Seven supporters ran the gamut politically and socially, aligning those who might not otherwise connect with one another. Katherine Dunham and Josephine Baker provide one such example. By this time, both women had achieved considerable celebrity—Baker for the complicated web of primitivism, blackness, and glamor that she brought to the Parisian music-hall stage, and Dunham for

her nuanced portrayals of black North American and Caribbean folk dances and culture that she brought to the international concert stage.⁷ Although both women achieved some level of success in the United States, they reached the height of their dance careers once they left the country. Dunham spent a significant amount of time in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s touring North America, Europe, South America, Asia, and Australia with the Katherine Dunham Dance Company, while Baker, as I showed in the previous chapter, achieved star status following her 1925 hit debut in an all-black revue in the Parisian music-hall. Dunham and Baker had crossed paths a couple of years before McGee's 1951 execution, during Dunham's European tour that played London in the fall of 1948 and Paris in early 1949. During this time, Baker offered to introduce Dunham to Paris, "but coming from the London success, Dunham felt that she did not need an introduction and communicated this to Baker."⁸ Baker nonetheless still personally congratulated the company on their opening night at the Theatre de Paris in Montmartre.⁹ That evening was among the first of what evolved into "a very good relationship" that lasted for many years.¹⁰

Dunham's and Baker's stardom might have been the entree into their friendship, but their bond was likely strengthened by the realities they faced as black women who worked in the international entertainment industry. Their celebrity could not insulate them from the continued fact and practice of segregation and racism either in the United States (their old country) or in their travels to other cultural capitals of the world. Consequently, Dunham was in a constant state of emotional turmoil. While she and her company were in Buenos Aires, they received news that a young black Southern male had been lynched, which further exacerbated her turmoil.¹¹ Miles away, separated by

language, culture, and geography, the unresolved social violence that black people were experiencing in the United States scrambled into view. Not even the luxuries and prestige afforded by her star status could hold the rising specters at bay. “Haunted and assaulted” by this onslaught of news, Dunham *felt in spirit* that she must respond to these issues.¹² Unable to put away her disturbed feelings, and feeling that something had to be done, Dunham was on notice that whatever lingered in her and her company’s blind spots was very much alive and present. Katherine Dunham had been summoned to the ancestral burial grounds.

Southland is Dunham’s *something-to-be-done*. Rehearsals for the show began while the company was in Buenos Aires in the fall of 1950; in January 1951, *Southland* premiered as a dramatic ballet at the Teatro Municipal in Santiago, Chile. Commissioned by the Symphony of Chile and performed by the Dunham Dance Company, *Southland* dramatizes the deep stain of American racism, and the “strange fruit” that it bears in the American South. It is, simply, a tale about lynching, directed “toward the conscience not of one nation, but of all human beings who are not yet aware of the destructive dangers of hatred.” Richard, a young black man, is lynched in the first scene following a white woman’s false accusation of rape, yet he ghosts the second scene when a funeral procession “symbolically” bears his broken body through an urban cafe. Choreographically, the ballet draws from Dunham’s rich repertoire of dances based upon her ethnographic research in Haiti and throughout the Caribbean, and that also included traditional dances from the urban North and plantation South in the United States; however, Dunham designed *Southland* to “surpass purely theatrical and artistic aspirations.”¹³ She hoped that the ballet would expose the ill of lynching in such a way

that “the conscience of the many [would] protest and save further destruction and humiliation.”¹⁴

Dunham was by no means the only artist who confronted the unresolved violence of lynching through creative production, but the means by which she crafts her story is the topic of this chapter. Speaking in Spanish before the audience at the Santiago premiere, Dunham opened the show with a short prologue. “[*Southland*] is the story of no actual lynching in the southern states of America,” she tells audience members, “and still it is the story of every one of them.”¹⁵ I am interested in the way Dunham positions *Southland* as a synecdoche for which “no actual lynching” acquires the infinite, exponential quality of “every one of them.” I propose in this chapter to use Richard’s lynched body, and the way in which pain is used to connect the audience to the subject matter, to further deliberate upon this matter. The lynched black body remains an iconic image of racial hatred in the history of the United States. Exposed, displayed, and broken, the lynched body is at once a material site of terror and suffering as well as a spectacular remnant or leftover of a brutal hate ritual. In this regard, Richard’s lynched body joins in chorus with the women I identify in this project—such as Sara Baartman and Josephine Baker, as well as Aunt Hester, a slave woman, and Mary Turner, a lynch victim, both of whom I will introduce shortly; and Sechita, who I will introduce in the following chapter—who were subjected to the violence of black women’s display. Although the display of the women’s bodies, or the making of their bodies into public or discursive spectacles, was itself a display of power, the display also demarcated and compensated for the limits of various discourses of race, gender, and sexuality.¹⁶ Richard assumes this same role in *Southland*, for the materiality of his lynched body is not only a visual projection and manifestation of

racial hatred, but similarly demarcates the limits of creative, imaginative discourse surrounding lynching.

Dunham relies on and complicates the familiarity of such discourse in *Southland* through her choreography and through the play text that she wrote for use in rehearsals. (The script was used to “build dramatization, [but was] deleted for [the] performance.”¹⁷) For instance, Dunham choreographs and dramatizes the white male-white female-black male triangulation that was commonly identified in public and creative discourse about lynching. She also choreographs the factors that collude in the lynch act through allusions to white patriarchal power structures as well as white women’s multi-positionality and black men’s vulnerability within that power structure. But Dunham complicates this discourse by showcasing the tenderness of a young black couple’s courtship, the emotional and psychic aftermath of lynching, and the jagged efforts to construct a life in the wake of such horror. By choreographing these particular aspects of the lynch act—what Toni Morrison might call the *interiority* of lynching—Dunham not only disrupts the familiar white male-white female-black male triangulation, but also joins a larger sisterhood of black women playwrights who were similarly using the stage to explore the emotional complexities of lynching, including early 20th century black women playwrights Angelina Weld Grimké, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson. These women writers attended to the lingering turmoil that surrounded the lynching act, giving more attention to the lynch victim’s family and community following a lynching than to depicting the grotesquerie of the lynch act itself.¹⁸ By attending to this aspect of the lynching act, black women playwrights, in effect, signaled toward the haunting, specter-quality of lynching.

This, however, is where Dunham parts company with these women playwrights, for “the story of ever one of them” that she wanted to tell exceeded the discursive parameters of their conventional playwriting and dramatic performance as it was used by women such as Grimké, Johnson, and Dunbar-Nelson. Dunham not only attends to the emotional turmoil of lynching, but also depicts a lynching scene, and, furthermore, also casts the lynched body in a prominent role throughout the remainder of the production. By bearing Richard’s lynched body through an urban cafe, Dunham dramatizes, choreographs, and gives a body to what remained ghostly in early 20th century lynching dramas. She effectively lends a glance into the ancestral burial grounds, showing how the realm of death is in constant contact with and leaves its imprint on the living. I am concerned, though, about what Richard’s phenomenal return to the ancestral burial grounds reveals about Dunham’s synecdochical attempts to tell the story of American lynching. If Richard’s return is an indication that his lynched body has become a story for something or someone besides itself, then by what means is his (lynched) self displaced? I identify the infliction of pain as the source through which the lynched self is displaced, and the lynched body is reappropriated, thus acquiring the status of synecdoche. Using literary scholar Elaine Scarry’s theory of pain and Frantz Fanon’s theory of black subjectivity, I show how the torture of lynching forcibly and phenomenally renders the body into an open system that is vulnerable to both the needs of the dramatized lynch mob and the audience of white affluent Americans and Chileans, as well as to the phantasmal comings-and-goings of other stories of lynching. I show, too, how pivotal Julie, the white woman who falsely accuses Richard of rape, is in this displacement. While *Southland* reconfigures the discursive imagination of lynching, the infliction of pain not

only forcefully dislodges Richard's individuality and obscures his suffering, but also illustrates the costs and risks of Dunham's *Southland* project.

Because Dunham strived for a synecdochical representation of lynching and its effects, her choreography and playwriting are thus more closely aligned with a discursive treatment of lynching espoused, for instance, by renowned journalist and NAACP administrator Walter White, whose investigative reporting on the particular lynching case of Mary Turner will be of service to this conversation. White shares with early African American writers such as Frederick Douglass a decided political aim to speak out against the discriminatory and violent practices that black communities dealt with on a daily basis; for Douglass, this meant the abolition of slavery; for White, this meant the abolition of lynching. Both writers used their access to print to shape popular views on the subjects that were a determining factor in the wellbeing of black communities. However, as the writings by White and Douglass illustrate, the events that they were forced to describe often took them into uncharted discursive territory. White's disinclination to relay the revolting details of lynch victim Mary Turner's death, for example, mirror Douglass' own unease about describing the beating of his Aunt Hester, an enslaved woman. However their political interests demanded that they confront those indescribable (and not simply unmentionable) things in whatever manner they could. Therefore, despite their best intentions, both Douglass' and White's writing nonetheless reveal the ways in which black women's bodies were necessary to demarcate and synecdochically compensate for the limits of discourse surrounding the abolition of enslavement and lynching.

As this chapter shows, the limits of the lynching discourse are varied and variously redressed, often by way of synecdochical depictions of tortured black bodies. *Southland*

provides a unique opportunity to further explore this matter, for Dunham's treatment of lynching, though rendered in dance, achieves the level of discourse, in the way that it engages in ongoing literary—ranging from dramatic, to journalistic, to autobiographical — and public lynching discourse. However, *Southland* is also appropriate because it holds a special place in Dunham's professional trajectory, and in the history of black concert dance generally, as an example of dance *agitprop* (or *agitation-propaganda*). A few preliminary notes will be of particular use to readers before I continue with the chapter. Although Dunham was no stranger to political activism in the 1930s and 1940s, the Red Scare and growing political conservatism of the 1950s threatened to stamp any perceived dissent as subversive and un-American. The subject of lynching in *Southland* pitched the production into this very category: although lynching (and, arguably, its successor “legal lynching”) was prevalent in national media, it was nonetheless relegated to the margins of American politics—that is, effectively silenced, forgotten, or deemed negligible—by the death of federal anti-lynching legislation in the fall of 1950 by the Eighty-first Congress. By drawing attention to the practice of lynching at a time when the United States was establishing itself as an influential global power, Dunham highlighted the hypocrisies of a nation that could condemn unjust practices abroad, but look away and forget that a significant population of its own citizens remained vulnerable to mob law. Dunham's attempts to keep the issue of lynching in the foreground of American and global consciousness thus cast her as a significant discursive interlocutor in ongoing conversations about race and racism, and the discrepancies between U.S. foreign and domestic policy.

Yet even as *Southland* “laid the moral groundwork for subsequent expressions of affirmation and dissent” for all those who dared to protest social injustice¹⁹, in the context of an increasingly conservative U.S. political milieu, this inevitably troubled relationships with the Chilean press, her own company, and especially with the U.S. State Department. In fact, because *Southland* stood as an example of artistic propaganda, Dunham and her company were forced to leave Santiago within days of the premiere after their visas were cancelled²⁰, and subsequently received the cold shoulder from the U.S. embassy upon their return to Buenos Aires, Argentina. The State Department effectively silenced the production and blacklisted Dunham’s company to the point that they could not secure longstanding financial backing for the next decade; they were forced to disband in 1965.²¹ The federal silencing not only stunted the life of *Southland*, but also brought a close to a major chapter in the history of black concert dance. In fact, the impact of the federal silencing is still resonant; only a few documents about *Southland* exist in Dunham’s archive—that are, for instance, no original playbills, souvenir program booklets, or other publicity, but only simple typewritten pages bearing the content of program notes, a working script, and a prologue that Dunham spoke in Spanish before the Santiago premiere. The federal silencing initiated over a half-century ago continues to obscure the archival fact that existed at all.²²

For all of these reasons, *Southland* shapeshifts throughout this chapter, standing in one moment as the production that dared to dramatize the specter of lynching and its aftermath during the Cold War era. In another moment, *Southland* documents the pain that a young man bears as the sacrificial lamb in the attempt to tell the story of every lynching—a pain that the story unwittingly, albeit inevitably, dissipates and renders

ghostly. And in yet another moment, *Southland* is the revolving door between the socio-political world of the mundane, the unresolved albeit ancestral world of the ancestral burial grounds, and our own surrender to imagination in those moments when the archive raises more questions than it answers. These are the complexities that Dunham might have also faced as she crafted *Southland* as her *yes* to ghostly confrontation.

Prologue to a Prologue

Katherine Dunham, born in 1909, tells the story of her childhood in her memoir *Touch of Innocence*, which was published in 1959. Like her friend Josephine Baker, Dunham was a native Midwesterner. She was raised in Glen Ellyn and Joliet, Illinois, two suburbs just outside Chicago. Her father, Albert Millard Dunham, was a black man who was raised in Memphis, Tennessee, and her mother, Fanny June, a divorcee, mother of five children by a previous marriage, and grandmother of four, was a mixed-race woman of French Canadian and Native American ancestry. Albert co-owned a small tailoring business and his wife, who was twenty years his senior, was a principal in a local school. Katherine Dunham's early life in the suburbs with her parents and brother Albert, Jr. came with considerable grief.²³ Her mother died and her father descended into bitterness; the once playful young man now was hard-hearted and angry. Dunham and her brother Albert, Jr. were sent to live with various family members in Chicago until her father, Albert, Sr. married Annette Poindexter. The new family settled down in Joliet, another Chicago suburb, but Albert, Sr.'s new life did not relieve his bitterness. Dunham lived in a constant state of unhappiness and loneliness throughout her adolescence as her father controlled the family through abuse and anger. Her only comfort was her brother and her

vivid imagination. Albert, Jr. left home after a violent encounter with their father, and shortly later, Dunham did as well.

After a stint at a junior college in Joliet, Dunham followed her brother to the University of Chicago in 1929, where she was first introduced to anthropology and learned that black American culture had roots on the African continent; she subsequently chose anthropology as her course of study. The next few years would be a flurry of activity, for it was around this time that she began studying ballet with Ludmilla Speranzeva, Mark Turbyfill, Ruth Page, and Vera Mirova. In 1930, Dunham founded her first dance company *Ballet Nègre*, an all-black ballet company. Three years later, she opened her first school of dance in Chicago where she taught young black dancers about their African heritage, but with a focus on modern dance rather than ballet.

As Dunham advanced as a dance instructor, she began to develop her own style, which was greatly informed by her early training in ballet and modern dance and cultural anthropology. In 1933, Dunham acquired the funding to do preliminary research in the Caribbean, and discovered her strong affinity for Haiti. In the following years, she studied closely with prominent anthropologists Robert Redfield and Melville Herskovits, and in 1935 was awarded a research grant from the Julius Rosenwald Foundation for the study of dance in the West Indies. She graduated with a Ph.B. degree (a bachelor of philosophy) in cultural anthropology in 1936. She continued her research, published regularly and conducted ethnographic studies while she traveled throughout the Caribbean and the diaspora; but as her dance career gathered more momentum, she had less time for extensive anthropological research. Yet, using her training in anthropology and dance, she continued to develop her singular dance style. Her genius lay in her “development of a

corporeal, spiritual, politically engaged aesthetic”²⁴; not only did her aesthetic revel in the “sheer physicality of expressive movement,” it also invited her, her company members, and audiences to “explore what that same movement [says] about the world around [them].”²⁵ Such an exploration rendered dance a deeply spiritual, personal, and political practice, ideals that were entrenched in her development of the “Dunham dance technique,” which grew out of her fieldwork in Haiti in the 1930s. The technique, which melded her formal studio training with ritual movement she learned while observing and participating in Haitian and other Caribbean religious ceremonies, became the foundation for a concert dance style that served her for years to come.

Dunham’s technique reflected her training as a scholar and an artist. Yet critics and reviewers could not seem to reconcile her intellectual and artistic inclinations. Ranging from “the hottest thing” on Broadway to “an intelligent anthropologist of note,” Dunham brought artistry to academic pursuits, and a determined, steady rigor to her creative work.²⁶ She opened the Katherine Dunham School of Dance and Theater in New York in 1944 and “through the 1940s—from club work at *Ciro’s* in Hollywood and the *Martinique Club* in New York to musicals in Chicago and performances in Mexico City, London, Paris, and Rome”—Dunham and her company of singers, dancers, and musicians seemed to be on “a perpetual tour across America and around the world.”²⁷ However, Dunham remained sensitive to the ongoing struggles for racial equality taking place back in the United States. In fact, her relative acceptance on the concert stages of major cosmopolitan cities throughout South America and Europe brought the injustices of her home country into greater relief.²⁸

One such injustice was the ongoing practice of lynching. Although lynching was in steady decline by the 1930s, it was still prevalent and a significant concern for black communities, especially in the American South.²⁹ Organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) and the Commission for Interracial Co-operation, investigative journalism by writers like Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Walter White as well as edited monthly publications such as the *Crisis* (the official organ of the N.A.A.C.P.), *Opportunity* (the official organ of the National Urban League), and the *The Messenger* were at the forefront of anti-lynching efforts. Not only did these organizations, journalists, and magazines shape public opinion and raise racial and public consciousness on the topic of lynching and racial conflict, they also mobilized a sustained fight against mob law.³⁰ Despite their efforts, not to mention seven presidential petitions between 1890 and 1952 to pass anti-lynching legislation, almost two hundred anti-lynching bills were introduced in Congress during the first half of the 20th century—three of which passed in the House between the 1920 and 1940—only to be filibustered by the Senate.³¹

Herein lied the challenge for Dunham: to make visible in *Southland* that which was not only in decline, but had also been relegated to the edges of national consciousness by the Senate's failure to pass protective anti-lynching legislation. We might remember too that the failure of anti-lynching legislation coincided with the execution of eight black men charged with raping white women. Although the context and players were different, the McGee and Martinsville Seven cases largely paralleled popular discourses of lynching that told a story of black male assault upon white women's virtue. White male judges, rather than lynch mobs, ruled that the executions were the necessary and immediate means of redress, showing that the white male was still the appropriate figure to enact

and exact such disciplinary power. The familiar triangulation between white men, white women, and black men most often evoked in lynching discourse remained intact.

Dunham maintains this triangulation in her depiction of lynching and also disrupts it through the inclusion of a lead black woman character and the black community, as I show later in the chapter. The synecdochical story that Dunham hoped to tell demanded urgency tempered, though, with a measure of tact and decorum, which explains why she both adheres to and departs from familiar creative lynching discourse. And that story would have not always be an easy or joyful one. She reveals this in the prologue to *Southland*. Speaking in Spanish before her Chilean audience, Dunham claims that “the man who truly loves his country is the man who is able to see in it the bad as well as the good, and seeing the bad, declaim it at the cost of liberty or life.”³² She continues, praising the beauty of North America. She is awestruck by the wonder of its terrain, from the “hills of San Francisco through the prairies of the Middle West to the rugged puritanism of the East sea coast.”³³ Her adoration of the land flows easily into her love for the people of North America, a people who emanate “newness and youth and energy.” Any people who can bring such varied terrains under their submission, she intimates, are strong and capable when they put their youthful vitality to work for the “upward moving” of the nation.

Yet Dunham’s effusion soon takes on a different, if not ironic tenor when she raises the tender issue of race relations in the southland area, or the American South. Neither the land nor its people, she asserts, can hide the deep stain of racism that lingered there. In fact, Dunham continues, “a mark of blood and shame” spreads from under “the magnolia trees of the southland area and mingles with the perfume of the flowers.”³⁴

Dunham is, of course, drawing from the imagery of “Strange Fruit,” a song about lynching that was popularized over a decade before by vocalist Billie Holiday, and that was sung during the *Southland* lynch scene. Whereas the speaker of Holiday’s song contemplates the grotesquerie of the lynched body against the “pastoral scene of the gallant South” and recounts it with almost photographic, heart-wrenching precision, Dunham discloses:

I have not smelled the smell of burning flesh, and have never seen a black body swaying from a southern tree, [but] I have felt these things in spirit, and finally through the creative artist comes the need of the person to show this thing to the world, hoping that by so exposing the ill the conscience of the many will protest and save further destruction and humiliation.³⁵

Whether by circumstance of her upbringing in Joliet, a Chicago suburb; by the fact that she was on perpetual world tour with her company; or by sheer good fortune, Dunham—as was the case with many of the dance, music, visual, and literary artists who addressed the issue—had not experienced a lynching first hand. This, however, proved to be of little relief, for she had “felt these things in spirit,” grievous to the point that she had to “show this thing to the world.” The over-and-done-with that Avery Gordon speaks about refused to be quieted, refused to be left behind. *Southland* then becomes a kinesthetic, expressive index of Dunham’s will to remember.

Carving *Southland* into the Discourse of Lynching

The lynched black body remains an iconic image of racial hatred in the history of the United States, and particularly within the collective memory of black Americans. Exposed and broken, the lynched body is at once a site of terror and suffering as well as a spectacular remain or reminder of a brutal hate ritual. African American cultural

production has dealt extensively with the impact of lynching, ranging from the fiction of early black writers such as William Wells Brown, and the poetry of Claude McKay and Langston Hughes during the Harlem Renaissance through the realist expansions of the idea by Richard Wright and James Baldwin in the mid-twentieth century. As Trudier Harris explains in *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals* (1984), the first critical, book-length exploration of lynching in African American literature, depictions and representations of lynching by black writers and musical artists in the mid-20th century generally utilized the figure of the lynched body to demarcate the violent and violently policed boundaries between black and white communities. Within this genre of representation, the lynched body signaled a breach in social contract, and that some social space had been tainted or defiled by the black presence. The lynched black body, then, was for these writers read as an abjection from the white national body, thus telling more about white hypocrisy and immorality than about the interiority—that is the psychological and deeply emotional experiences of lynching.³⁶

Literary criticism on the topic has been relatively slow to theorize both the metaphorical and structural meanings of lynching in black literature over the course of the twentieth century.³⁷ The critical treatment of lynching in dramatic literature has been even slower to materialize. Within the past seven years, however, scholars like Judith Stephens and Koritha Mitchell have worked to address this gap in literary criticism.³⁸ This new criticism reveals a decided effort by early 20th century black women dramatists to address the psychological, social, and financial pressures that lynching put on the lives of those who remained after the lynching act.³⁹ For example, Angelina Grimke's attention to the psychological demands of lynching in her 1916 play *Rachel* put her among a

number of other black women artists who also explored the interior, deeply emotionally or psychologically rooted effects of lynching in the lives of black women and families. Dunham's attention to these issues in *Southland* thus place her in a sisterhood with other black women artists, writers and activists who used varied creative means to gauge the impact of lynching. We might also consider here Ida B. Well's fiery investigative journalism; Billie Holiday's song "Strange Fruit" in 1939 and Pearl Primus' 1943 dance production by the same name; and Toni Morrison's inclusion of lynching photography in *The Black Book*, a visual narrative of the black experience that she edited and published in 1974. And we might consider, too, visual artist Kara Walker's deft, contemporary use of silhouettes to tell stories of lynching. Considered collectively, we see the many ways in which black women artists have explored lynching.

Despite the differences in genre and time period, the creative works by these women artists share a sense of urgency. They all evince a foray into the ancestral burial grounds and a confrontation with the unresolved social violences that lingered there, and, furthermore, also invite us to ask how they carved their stories—stories that exceeded the readily available discursive standards—into existing creative lynching discourse. Although I might further explore any one of these women artists in order address this question, I want to bring two prominent African American male writers into this conversation: abolitionist Frederick Douglass and journalist Walter White. I am inclined to engage their work at considerable length for the particular way they use the black female body as synecdoches for the social concerns of their respective eras and to demarcate and compensate for the limits of discourse. Weighing both the gains and the costs of their discursive choices will in turn throw Dunham's discursive choices into greater relief.

I will begin here with a scene that Frederick Douglass recounts in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), where blood, torture and the violent display of the black female body collude to create what he calls a “terrible spectacle.”⁴⁰ In the opening pages of Douglass’ first chapter, he shares with readers the “bloody transaction” that introduced and interpolated him into the system of slavery: his Aunt Hester’s beating by Captain Anthony, the owner of the plantation on which Douglass lived as a young boy (5). Aunt Hester was, by Douglass’ account, a handsome woman “of noble form, and of graceful proportions, having very few equals, and fewer superiors, in personal appearance, among the colored or white women of [their] neighborhood” (4). “Why master was so careful of her,” Douglass writes, “may be safely left to conjecture” (4).

What Douglass “safely left to conjecture” captures the conundrum of early African American writing, and is a topic that I will return to shortly. For the moment, we might recall that the very mission of the slave narrative genre was to at once narrate the personal and systematic entanglements of oppression and defend black humanity and worth. Yet the early forebears of the tradition had to craft their experiences of suffering and toil in such a way “to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it,”⁴¹ which Dunham was similarly forced to consider in her delivery of *Southland*. Other self-emancipated writers such as Olaudah Equiano, Harriet Jacobs, Henry Bibb, and Henry Box Brown also faced these dilemmas as they plotted how to recount their escape from the peculiar institution. These early writers were often so careful not to bewilder or offend the delicate and respectable sensibilities of those who could do something that they were often “silent about many things, and ‘forgot’ many other things.”⁴² Douglass’ silence around just why Captain Anthony was so careful of Aunt Hester represents one such

moment when silence—or not saying something forthrightly—was deployed in pursuit of the larger political interests.

As Douglass continues his story, readers learn that Captain Anthony had warned Aunt Hester not to go out in the evenings to be with Ned, her presumed lover. Instead, Anthony demanded, Aunt Hester was to be available at his call. One night, Aunt Hester “happened to be absent when [Captain Anthony] desired her presence” (4). Furious that Aunt Hester had not been available upon his bidding, Captain Anthony stripped her to the waist the following morning, tied her to a hook in the ceiling joist. He then commenced to beat her until “the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor...It was all new to me” (5).

It was all new to me. Douglass projects here the stunned bewilderment of a young boy who is introduced to the atrocities of the peculiar institution. *It was all new to me.* The monumentality of the event overwhelms the discursive moldings that are available to him, for he is not simply following the accepted formula for life writing; he is also grappling with the exuberance and drama of black female flesh and the terrible spectacularity of its physical violation. By witnessing Aunt Hester’s beating, Douglass passes through “the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery” (4). At the same time, Aunt Hester’s physically violated body both reflects and instantiates the violence of the peculiar institution, and serves as the means by which the ideologies of racial supremacy sediments itself onto the body. Not only is the brutality of slavery reinscribed onto her body through the cuts of the whip, but similarly through each word of Douglass’ recount. Yet, Aunt Hester’s body is the necessary bond that holds his story together, that makes it go. Her body is the structure around which his words prey, the physical immediacy toward which

they aspire, but never become. It is no wonder that he at a loss for how to talk about the sights that served as the gate into the hell of slavery, even admitting “I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it” (4).

Douglass’ recollection of Aunt Hester’s bloody, slavery-marked body, and with it her shrieking, heart-wrenching scream, held all of the sediment and remains of the slave experience that he would hear again and again in the singing and moaning of the slaves on the plantation. Yet, rooted as it is in a desire for the abolition of slavery, Douglass’ story nonetheless delineates both the gains and costs of writing about slavery, for the story betrays an unsettling intimacy with the pain and violence inflicted upon his aunt. Carving out a discursive space for his story meant impinging upon the discursive space of Aunt Hester’s body and co-opting her pain, thereby enacting a form of discursive violence that, though different from Captain Anthony’s beating in intent, nonetheless subjects her body to his own discursive needs. The achievements made by narrating the singularity of his individual story forcibly pushes Aunt Hester’s story into the background. Even though her heart-rending shrieks testify to the pain that she feels, this pain is nonetheless co-opted through Douglass’ narrative goals, such that her cries no longer register her experience of the infliction of violence, but instead communicate Douglass’ tribulation of knowing finally that he is enslaved; that he, too, is vulnerable to such abuse; that, as a slave, he too is without a discourse of redress or vindication. Douglass’ recount shows the risks that are encountered when trying to extend humanity to the dispossessed, and protest inhumane actions rendered to maintain racial power and supremacy.

As I will show in the following section, Dunham similarly betrays such intimacy when Richard’s lifeless, lynched body is revealed to the audience. Unable to help herself,

Julie, the young white woman who accuses him of rape, stares at the lynched Richard—or more appropriately, displaces his pain—with her own stupefied wonder, caught in the pulls of both fascination and disgust. Richard, like Aunt Hester, becomes an outward projection of someone else’s inner desire or agenda; and Dunham, like Douglass, encounters the promise and the risks of launching their political agendas through their respective genres. African American writers and artists of all stripes would continue to encounter this dilemma. While Douglass’ story asks us to consider this through the lens of 19th century slavery, the following story asks us to consider it within the context of 20th century, bringing us closer and within the similar cultural context of Dunham’s *Southland*.

On Sunday, May 19, 1918, Mary Turner was lynched on the border between Brooks and Lowness Counties in Georgia. By several newspaper accounts, Mary died alone, for her husband Hayes, implicated in the murder of a local white plantation owner, was lynched less than twenty four hours before his wife. Mary’s death was among numerous others in a lynching spree that lasted one full week. Aside from headlines reading “Negro Woman is Hanged” and “Georgia Huns Lynch Negro Woman,” readers know little more about the young lynch victim.⁴³ Her singular story as a young black woman lynch victim is largely consumed by the homogenizing effects of violence, and by racially motivated violence particularly. Yet because the majority of lynch victims in the period following the Civil War through the first half of the 20th century were male, and public discourse was subsequently shaped around that fact, the singularity of her story is also threatened by the conventions of lynching discourse. Thus as nebulous as the headline “Negro Woman is Hanged” may seem, it nonetheless suggests that this lynching was somehow different from the thousands of other lynchings that had taken place

throughout the country. In effect, Mary's story disrupts the expected discourse surrounding lynching.

This disruption is captured in a September 1918 investigative report that Walter White published in *Crisis*, the official journal of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). After an extensive investigation—for which White, who could pass as a white man, traveled into the South to gather information—White relays the events that led to the Turners' deaths in "The Work of a Mob."⁴⁴ The death of Hampton Smith, a local white farmer and plantation owner, and the shooting of his wife were the cornerstone of the lynching spree.⁴⁵ Mary and Hayes had a fraught relationship with Smith, and news quickly spread that they and other workers on the Smith plantation were complicit in Smith's shooting death on May 17. A mob of men and boys soon captured Hayes, and carried out their own extrajudicial death sentence. When Mary spoke out against the lynch-killing of her husband, she then became the object of the mob's wrath, and met her husband's fate less than twenty four hours later.

White's journalistic remove quakes under the weight of Mary's story. "The murder of the [other] Negro men [who were murdered in this lynching spree] was deplorable enough in itself," White writes, "but the method by which Mrs. Mary Turner was put to death was so revolting and the details [so] horrible that it is with reluctance that the account is given" (222). *So revolting. So horrible.*⁴⁶ Through the fog of his own incredulity, White reminds the reader, and perhaps himself, that what follows is the result of methodic and meticulous investigative work. Clearly, White's reluctance stands uneasily in the face of journalistic duty and, more important, his commitment to antilynching

activism. The imperatives of the latter two insist on the abolition of the former, and White relents. He plunges into Mary's story that ultimately ends in death.

In the aftermath of her husband's murder, Mary was forced to confront the stinging reality of her situation. Perhaps emboldened by her own fear, anger, and terror, she spoke out against her her husband's death by lynching. Furthermore, White relates, Mary claimed that if she ever found out "the names of the persons who were in the mob that lynched her husband, she would have warrants sworn out against them and have them punished in the courts" (222). The irony of her remarks is all too obvious and at the same time all too tragic: too obvious because she wants to appeal to the same legal system the mob bypassed as they instated and pressed toward their own version of swift justice, thereby highlighting the mob's blatant disregard for the law; and too tragic because her remarks incited the already "tender feelings of the mob" to the extent that they determined to "teach her a lesson" (222). Mary fled, but was captured by the mob at noon the following day, Sunday. Grief stricken and terrified, Mary "was taken to a lonely and secluded spot, down a narrow road over which the trees touch at their tops" (222), where she shared a fate that her husband had encountered less than twenty-four hours earlier.

Besides that which White had already reported—that she had been physically assaulted by Smith the plantation owner, and that she was married to Hayes, who had been lynched the previous evening—we know very little about Mary; local coverage of the lynching spree similarly did not offer much in the way of biography. As the story continues, however, White offers an important kernel of information, one that the local and even Northern papers failed to recount: Mary was in her eighth month of pregnancy

at the time she was killed. Her delicate state had no effect upon her killers: neither she nor her child were spared the mob's exacting wrath.

The “terrible spectacle” of Mary Turner’s lynching and the events leading up to it are often silenced because the discursive standards for talking about lynching more readily allowed for a story that cast lynching as white male assertion of power against the “alleged” threat of rampant black male sexuality and subsequent ruin of Southern white women’s virtue. Julie Buckner Armstrong shares this sentiment when she writes in *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching* (2011) that “Turner is one of the countless black women whose stories have received insufficient attention in a history of racial violence that for too long has been triangulated between white men, black men, and white women.”⁴⁷ Yet the burden of her story was one of those that Dunham hoped to capture in her 1951 production of *Southland*. Mary Turner’s broken body is called upon to push the discursive borders of the lynching conversation, as Aunt Hester’s body was used for the topic of enslavement, and as Richard’s body would be used for mid-20th century discussions of lynching. On the one hand, Mary’s lynched body overwhelms even the farthest reaches of language and comprehensibility, as White’s reluctance to recount the story demonstrate. On the other hand, Mary Turner’s lynched and castrated body, broken and robbed of its vitality and vigor, visually marks the consequences of mob justice, thereby illustrating, “what can—and cannot—be said about lynching.”⁴⁸ It is into this abyss of the failure of language that Dunham plunged as she sought to create *Southland* from afar.

Southland: The Story of Every One of Them

Southland bears the markings of agitprop (or “agitation propaganda”) artistic production in an era when political dissent in art or otherwise “seemed illegitimate, subversive, un-American.”⁴⁹ Less than a decade earlier, artists like dancer Pearl Primus had “felt most encouraged” to create protest art, as she did in her dance interpretation of “Strange Fruit,” a poem about lynching written by Jewish schoolteacher Abel Meeropol and popularized by African American singer Billie Holiday.⁵⁰ Dunham, then, was not alone in the attention she gave to the lynching question, as artists of all stripes grappled with the terror and the aftermath of the iconic ritual of race hatred.

The *Southland* story marks Dunham’s contribution to this continuing dialogue.⁵¹ The ballet is presented in two scenes and opens on the sweeping landscape of an antebellum Southern mansion, which soon gives way to a beautiful magnolia tree that stands as a central feature of the first scene. *Southland* dramatizes the events preceding, during, and following the lynching of Richard, a young black field hand. (The dramatic characters were called by the dancers’ real names.) A Greek chorus of singers reflect the dramatic action by way of mime and the distinct sounds of Negro spirituals, plantation work songs, revival hymns, and popular songs of the era. As the story unfolds, we meet Lucille, a black woman fieldworker who is shamelessly courted by Richard, and Julie, a white girl who has just been physically assaulted by her lover, Lenwood Morris (who is, in actuality, a black man playing in whiteface). Richard and a group of field hands discover Julie unconscious beneath the magnolia tree. Against the advice of his friends and the chorus, Richard attempts to help the girl. But upon awaking and seeing him, Julie finds a way to save herself from the humiliation and embarrassment of her assault. “Nigger!” she

cries then accuses the young black man of rape. Julie sows her lie in the ear of a sympathetic and avenging mob; soon after, Richard is lynched.

It is only when Richard's lynched body swings toward her in full view that Julie realizes the full impact of her crime. Overwhelmed yet fascinated by his broken body, she goes to him and rips a piece of his clothing, a souvenir of her own sense of terror, triumph, and guilt. Her bravado falters momentarily as she encounters Richard's sweetheart, Lucille. Although Julie moves on, Lucille grieves. The chorus grieves. Then they gather and leave with the body of the young boy. In the final scene, flashed to a different time and space, the chorus bears Richard's lynched body in a funeral cortege. The procession is symbolically witnessed by patrons of a Basin Street cafe; although they do not see the procession, they experience the ghostly presence of Richard's pain as they dance and weep in a "spirit of frenzied cynicism." As the ballet closes, the blind beggar sees the "true fact" of the past suffering and seeks "the answer, which all of us who love humanity, seek more than ever at this moment."

Southland lends itself to many readings, even within my consideration about the limits of discourse, forceful displacement, and the extent to which pain and the proxy of the white female body is used to connect the audience to the subject matter. I have established already that *Southland* both adhered to and departed from existing creative discourse about lynching. Dunham achieves this most visibly through the character Richard, whose role spans the realm of the living and the dead, and also delineates Dunham's adherence to and departure from existing discourse. Right away, we get the sense that Richard is content with his life, which stands in stark contrast to the myths of the black male rapists that predominated popular lynching discourse.⁵² It is perhaps

precisely because of this contentment that he attempts to help Julie when he finds her beneath the magnolia tree.

In this regard, Dunham shares similarities with Grimké, Dunbar-Nelson, and Johnson, the three black women playwrights I mentioned in the opening pages of this chapter, in the way she situates the black male character within a harmonious and supportive home and community setting.⁵³ Dunham establishes this in the opening moments of the first scene. In the program notes from her Paris production of *Southland*, she admits that the scene is itself “perhaps even too obvious” in this delineation. Perhaps this is because she establishes the “fundamental simplicity [and] earth-dignity of the Negro” against the sweet scent of the magnolia tree, a burdened symbol of racial violence that carries over from the song “Strange Fruit” and also establishes it through the characters’ connection to the land as fieldworkers. Further connections are made through the fieldworkers’ use of Southern dialect (revealed in the rehearsal script), as well as their inclination to dance “Juba” and fall sway to the “ecstatic force of the true Negro spiritual” and revival hymns.⁵⁴

Yet the familiarity of the simple Negro trope is undercut by the tender encounter between Richard and his sweetheart Lucy. It is quite clear that Dunham intended for this to be a show of courtship—a respectable courtship—between these young lovers. Their easy flirtation is punctuated by Lucy’s “small cry of joy as she dances to him” and her gentle teasing. For instance, when Lucy talks about the work that awaited her at her employer’s home, she tells Richard, “I ain’ goin’ be tiahed—I goin’ say ‘He lov’ me, an’ I—I like he a lil bit.” Richard apparently takes Lucy’s teasing in good humor, for once she exits, he confesses:

Seem like I wan to say somethin' too big to say. Hit staht here
(pointing to stomach)
an' stop here
(to throat—chorus nods approval)
Hit too big to stay inside me and hit won' come out.
Hit—hit—O Lawdy, I mis [sic] love dat gal!⁵⁵

Dunham again demarcates the limits of discourse on lynching through the introduction of tenderness between two young black lovers, rather than playing into the discursive acceptability of a depiction of sexual aggression between (or assumed to be between) a black man and a white woman. Yet this tenderness is in the beginning still beyond the reaches of language, for Richard feels compelled to say something that is nonetheless “too big to say.” He can trace its presence, beginning in his stomach, leading up to his throat, where it apparently sits restlessly between impression and articulation: it’s too big to stay in, but too big to come out. The Greek chorus listens all the while to his musing with a caring ear. It is, in fact, only after they offer their approval—that is, affirms him despite his seeming unintelligibility—that he is finally able to express his love for Lucy. Even though Dunham relies in large measure upon a lynching narrative in which a black man is falsely accused of raping a white woman, she nonetheless complicates that narrative through displays of love seen in Richard’s and Lucy’s romance.

The young couple’s flirtation is cut short by their responsibility to their work. After all of the fieldworkers have departed, the scene picks up on Julie, the young white woman, and her lover Lenwood. The two have been locked in an embrace behind the magnolia tree, as if to signify that they—a white man and a white woman—are literally the causes *behind* the racial violence that the Southern magnolia tree has come to symbolize. Dunham titles this portion of the scene “Fight,” which stands in stark contrast to

Richard's and Lucy's portion titled "Love Scene." Julie's laughter opens the Fight Scene, but little more is included in the rehearsal script:

Hey!
(after circle)
Lemme go you bastard
(kicks him—ad lib conversation till Lenwood leaves.)⁵⁶

It seems that Dunham gave considerable attention to the interactions between Richard and Lucy; however there is significantly less textual evidence that she did the same for Julie's and Lenwood's encounter. Although the script offers no indication of what caused the fight, the program notes from the Paris production offer a little more detail. After spotting the young white couple behind the tree, there is between Julie and Lenwood "a moment of ridicule, a reaction of resentment [after which] the warm southern atmosphere becomes one of violence, which leaves Julie lying unconscious under the magnolia tree after the attack of her companion."⁵⁷ The aggression associated with the myth of the black male rapist is taken up here by Lenwood, Julie's white boyfriend. Through Dunham's depiction of the white couple's argument, Dunham redirects the hostility of the rapist myth from a (presumed) black man to a (discursively unexpected) white man. Dunham again pushes the bounds of discursive expectation.

Richard's and Lucy's loving courtship stands in stark contrast to the ridicule and violence of Julie's and Lenwood's courtship. Lenwood's attack on Julie is significant for the way it skews the familiar white male-white female-black male triangulation associated with lynching. Although Richard, as the main black male character, is cast differently within this triangulation in the opening moments of the production, his friends are nonetheless hyperaware of the more familiar triangulation, for they show no evidence of any natural inclination to help Julie. They know full well what could potentially come of a

situation in which a black man is seen with a white woman. Their ambivalence acquires more clarity if considered through literary scholar Marlon Ross' notion of "race rape." Ross proposes the term in his article "Race, Rape, Castration," in which he considers how the violence of lynching extends beyond the actual practice itself. Ross argues that lynching, or simply the *threat* of lynching, carried with it not only the immediacy of physical punishment that eventually ended in death, but the threat of not knowing exactly where, how or on what whim this punishment might be executed. The disciplinary power that lynching held over black communities to (willingly or unwillingly) submit to de facto socio-political subjugation and public segregation, for instance, was effected largely through infliction of psychological violence. Ross proposes "race rape" to call attention to the way the psychological threat and physical acts of sexual-racial violence (such as castration) colluded in a system designed to confine and contain the threat of the black—and particularly the black male—body, and to "maintain the ideology of mastery."⁵⁸

We can also return to Frederick Douglass' autobiography and use Ross' theory of race rape to further mine what Douglass "safely left to conjecture." Even though Douglass's silence leads the reader to presume that Captain Anthony raped his Aunt Hester, his silence might also reflect his anxiety around his own sexual safety: as Ross suggests, such anxiety stemmed from "not only the serially experienced pain [of beatings, for example] but also and perhaps more intensely from the trauma of not knowing exactly when or *how* punishments [would] be meted out."⁵⁹ For Douglass, and I would add the young men who populated Dunham's *Southland* over one century later, the sheer unpredictability and incessant anticipation of brutality might have been as painful if not more so than the physical pain of a beating or the torture of lynching itself. Thus,

Douglas's anxiety around his own sexual safety mirrors and presages the same anxiety that Dunham's Southerners experienced when they happened across Julie. Ross' theory, then, expands how we think about racial, sexual, and psychic/psychological violence as a key attribute of slavery and the legacy that it leaves in black Southern men's response to the threat of lynching.

Dunham choreographs this anxiety into *Southland*, while at the same time pointing to the ethical consequences of such anxiety. Although the fieldhands are adamant that they should leave Julie as she is—unconscious beneath the magnolia tree—Richard is nonetheless torn by and punished for his inclination to help someone in need. Thus, this moment in the ballet not only highlights the anxiety that the men felt, but also shows how the threat of lynching precludes even basic enactments of humanity, which has serious implications for everyone. Julie, however, shamed by her present circumstance, would not recognize Richard's offer to help as any humane act. It is little surprise, then, that she lashes out this person who might be in an even more vulnerable social position than she. Awakened by his touch—Julie “regains consciousness and more terrified than [Richard] cries the hated word ‘Nigger’.”⁶⁰ Julie's cry “Nigger!” is the only spoken word in the entire production. Subjected a moment earlier to her lover's abuse, she “[realizes] her advantage” in an instant: immediately, Julie “becomes aware of the possibilities of drama and excitement and seizes the opportunity to escape from the sordidness of her own life by becoming the heroine of a self-created saga of lust and violation.”⁶¹ Growing braver in her resolution, she claims: “Look, look everybody, he did it... That nigger bastard—.”⁶²

Julie's accusation is interrupted by Richard's denials and self-defense: “No, no—I ain' done it—I ain' done it—I ain' done nothin'!! (continues wordless sounds in denial).”

Richard is aware that Julie's "Nigger!" a verbal utterance performing its own hell, could very well be synonymous with lynching. But without the language or structures to validate his innocence, Richard—perhaps pained by the betrayal or even by the threat of race rape—can only resort to "wordless sounds." Although the physical pain of lynching has not yet been inflicted upon his body, his response to the violation of his innocence and his inability to prove otherwise "does not simply resist language," as literary scholar Elaine Scarry says of pain, generally, "but actively destroys it."⁶³ Richard undergoes an "immediate reversion to a state anterior to language"—that is to his wordless sounds—"that a human being makes before language is learned."⁶⁴ As a black man, vulnerable within the matrix of power established through Dunham's white male-white female-black male triangulation, Richard has no external accompaniment for his inner turmoil: his recourse to language—which, in this case, reflects his innocence and credibility—is crushed beneath his fright and confusion.

Richard continues to deny Julie's accusations, as she, "playing the role of the injured Southern white woman," spins her lie:

I was jus' passin' by
 (gathering sympathy of crowd)
an' he—he—
 (unable to say indecent words, weeps)
 (turning again into enraged whore)
Well, ain't ya goin' to burn the nigger? Well,
that's more like it. That's better. Justice,
I say. Burn 'em all.
 (voice trails out in ad lib as lunch [sic] dance begins)

What was likely intended as the "lynch dance"—rather than the "lunch dance" indicated in the script—was a solo habanera performance by Julie that was to be "insolent, full of anger, hate, and entire catharsis of released guilt and fear and sexual association." The

Greek chorus—comprised of singers who have signaled Richard’s innocence all along—cover their heads as the mob that Julie has rallied together heads toward the magnolia tree.⁶⁵ Although the “actual lynching was supposedly done offstage,” Julie was directed to act as if it were happening onstage.⁶⁶ Several signals announce the accomplishment of the crime: a red glow from the wings simulating the body burning⁶⁷, the growing flames, and the smell of burning flesh.⁶⁸

Through the accomplishment of the lynching crime, Richard’s lynched body accompanies and manifests Julie’s need for escape and the mob’s mass hatred: he becomes the tie between their interior state of hate and the external world. Richard thus affirms the white mob’s capacity “to move out beyond the boundaries of his or her own body into the external, sharable world.”⁶⁹ The capacity that Elaine Scarry speaks of here is one, I might add, that is rooted in the privileges of hegemonic power, which enables Julie and the white mob to externalize their interior feelings of hatred and disgust through the display of violence. Richard is subjected to slander and later to the torture of lynching, yet within the *Southland* story has no way to externalize his defense or pain. Thus lynching makes Richard into an object, such that his body becomes an outward manifestation of an inward condition of white hate and self-loathing.

A moment of silence—akin in this instance to Suzan-Lori Parks’ notion of the “spell,” which, as I show in the following chapter, Shange uses to accomplish her dramatic task—precedes the lynching.⁷⁰ I identify this moment as the infliction of Richard’s pain by the torture of lynching, as well as the moment when his self is forcefully displaced and he becomes Dunham’s synecdochical story of every one of them. I would like to parse out these two separate though interrelated ideas in the upcoming pages, by first establishing

the infliction of pain as the motor for Dunham's synecdochical project. I will then delve more deeply into the moment in the production when Richard becomes the synecdoche for lynching that Dunham hopes to achieve.

The moment of pain—again, identified in the silence that precedes the lynch act—is the key to Dunham's project, the mode of identification through which she connects with the audience, and at the same time, the means by which one story becomes the story of them all. Because of Richard's vulnerability as a black man within *Southland's* matrix of white power, there is no route for Richard to truly externalize his pain. Because the lynch act itself is scripted as a manifestation, reminder, and justification of white supremacist power, Richard, one against many, is powerless to express his pain with any redemptive result. With no means of articulation, Richard's pain and fright joins in chorus with the groans and wailings of the ancestral burial grounds. Richard returns to the ancestral burial grounds precisely because his pain is unsharable in the realm of the mundane: so deeply interior is his pain that it can only be witnessed by others, like Mary and Hayes Turner, for instance, who have similarly experienced such pain, and more specifically, whose pain remains similarly unresolved. Ironically, through pain and the unintelligibility that it begets does Richard acquire a community who validates his experience of pain. Thus, like Frederick Douglass and Walter White before her, Dunham must betray the intimacy of pain and instead use it as a tool for political protest.

The demands and risks of Dunham's political protest in *Southland* are many. But in order to effect the kind of change that she hopes for, Dunham must find the balance between tact and immediacy. On the one hand, Dunham must be tactful, and present her subject matter in such a way that does not completely overwhelm the sophisticated tastes

of her audience. She was likely aware, like Douglass before her, that among her audience would be those with the influence to alleviate the subject of her production, or else she might not have mounted the production at all. On the other hand, Dunham must be unwavering and decided in her choice to make one lynching the story of them all.

Dunham deftly establishes this balance between urgency and decorum when Richard's "lynched [body] swings toward Julie in full view, suspended from the magnolia tree."⁷¹

As Richard is lynched only moments before, Julie dances the habanera, a dance performance intended to "[epitomize] the fury of all acts born of hatred and fear and guilt." However, once Richard's body swings before her, she realizes just what she has done. Her sense of power drains from her as she looks at the lynched body. She sees something of herself in Richard's broken, disfigured body. Unable to restrain herself, "she approaches the body, rips a piece of cloth from it as a souvenir of her moment of triumph and in a deeper sense as a reminder of her guilt." The mixture of conquest and shame only sustain her for so long, for she "falters in her bravado" as she meets the girl Lucille, Richard's sweetheart. While Lucille dances her grief to the song "Strange Fruit," Julie moves on.

This encounter between Julie, Lucille, and Richard's lynched body shows the challenge but also the achievement of the balance between urgency and decorum. Unlike popular lynching discourse, Dunham introduces a black woman into the discourse of lynching. Whereas popular discourse relied, as I have explained already, on the white male-white female-black male triangulation, Dunham scripts a confrontation between two figures who do not ordinarily meet. Dunham carefully directs the women to pass, though without conflict or rage or anger. Instead, Dunham opts, like the black women

playwrights in the early 20th century, to show that highly emotional part of the lynching story that is ignored in the familiar triangulation of lynching discourse. Lucy cries and grieves, showing how lynching, which destroys a body, nonetheless has an afterlife and begets ghosts that distort one's engagement with the world around them.

Dunham's balance between decorum and urgency is also shown in the moment when Julie takes a part of Richard's shirt as a souvenir of her crime. The candidness of Richard's broken body is thus tempered by the allure it acquires as a souvenir of a brutal ritual. I explained a similar phenomenon in the previous chapter, when I situated Josephine Baker within a genealogy of black female display that also included Sara Baartman, popularly known as the Hottentot Venus. Given the demands for their performances of otherness, both women were regarded as curios, as novelties with considerable allure. A part of their novelty, I explained, was that their personal stories could be displaced and subsequently replaced by the needs of their viewers. Performance studies scholar Harvey Young makes a similar claim for the lynched body by reading it as a souvenir.⁷² The lynched body as souvenir, Young explains, is a small scale reminder of a past event, and, therefore, like the curio, holds both material and metaphorical power. Accordingly, Richard's body is both a tangible, physical reminder (or remainder) of a past brutal lynch act as well as a site of synecdochical story telling.

The means by which Richard's lynched body acquires meaning other than its own is the concern that I want to now turn to. The phenomenal displacement that must occur for him to be a souvenir is further explained through Frantz Fanon's discussion of schema in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967).⁷³ In his oft-cited chapter entitled "The Fact of Blackness," Fanon describes an occasion "when [he] had to meet the white man's eyes."⁷⁴

Such an occasion, Fanon writes, scripts blackness not as a fact in itself, but as a notion that is known only in its relation to whiteness. Blackness, then, is not a dermic, corporeal fact, but a concoction of “a thousand details, anecdotes, stories” created by whiteness as a means of containing blackness (111). The gap between this concoction and the dermic, corporeal, lived experience of the world in a black body seems to be the “schema”: the “definitive structuring of the self and of the world—definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world” (111 emphasis added). Fanon uses as an example his encounter with a young boy on the train. “Look, a Negro!” the young boy exclaims (111). “On that day,” Fanon writes, “completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object” (112). Under the pressures of a world designed to operate in terms of race, the corporeal fact of black skin must yield to the “racial epidermal schema” (112), which showcases its power through this displacement or objectification.

For Fanon, blackness arises from this racial epidermal schema, and, moreover, depends on this dialectic that cleaves the self from the body. Whereas Fanon is interested in racial subjectivity, I am most intrigued by his description of the phenomenal displacement that occurs in this moment of encounter between the black body and the white world. His description offers a guiding light in my present exploration of Richard’s phenomenal displacement through the torture of lynching. On the one hand, Fanon’s claim that he took himself far off from his own presence and made himself an object presents a moment to consider the lynching from Richard’s perspective. Richard might very well have had to self-create this dialectic between his body and the outer world in

order to bear the violence the white mob inflicted upon him. What might be read as a strategy to simply bear his present condition also shows the particular vulnerability of the black body, made through its relation to whiteness, to the impingement of white hatred.

We can also identify such a moment in Julie's performance. In the moment when Julie dances her habanera, the audience cannot tell what is happening offstage; they can only see Julie, who strains to see what is happening offstage where the lynching is taking place. In this moment, Julie is the tie between the audience and Richard, serving as the proxy through which the audience experiences the lynching act.⁷⁵ In one regard, Julie's habanera becomes a mode of seeing, the scaffolding that potentially shapes and directs audience reaction. It follows, then, that if the audience *phenomenally becomes* Julie, then, they must also own—if vicariously—the insolence, anger, hate, guilt, fear and sexual association conveyed in her dance. Not only does the audience vicariously experience the grotesquerie of Richard's lynching through Julie's dance, but their own complicity and guilt, too.

Julie thus occupies multiple positions in *Southland*. Under Dunham's direction, the white female body is doubly positioned. On the one hand, she is a victim of domestic abuse and, like Richard, of white masculine power. On the other hand, she is also an instigator of violence against black people, and, as a white woman who can rouse and even enrage an entire community by falsely accusing a black man, serves as a proxy to that very same white masculinist power structure. On the first count, her individuality as a white woman within this structure is subsumed by larger, more formulaic interpretations and expectations about white womanhood. This is best captured when Julie's presses the sympathetic crowd to redress her imagined rape with a taunting, "Well, ain'g ya goin' to

burn the nigger? Well, that's more like it. That's better. Justice, I say. Burn 'em all." Julie knows that prevailing discourse surrounding lynching will accommodate her accusation of rape and give her the attention that she desires. But Julie's achievement of individuality denies the same for Richard, whose individuality disappears under the weight of her demand for "justice." Julie must don the shroud of victimhood in order to become "the heroine of a self-created saga"—that is, to individuate or set herself apart from the crowd—while Richard is, in exchange, forced to absent its own individuality and to stand in for "em all." Whereas Dunham was careful to skew the familiar triangulation between white men, white women, and black men, and to show how complicit white women were the lynching act, she was, nevertheless, sensitive to white women's particular vulnerability within this system.

In the moment when Richard's self is displaced, his animating spirit, dislocated by Julie's accusation, the mob's infliction of pain, and the fulfillment of the lynch crime, has fled the body. These pains unmake Richard's body into flesh, which then becomes vulnerable to co-optation, and the larger goals of Dunham's project; literally empty, Richard's flesh awaits the moment when it is filled with the next ready discourse.⁷⁶ As a synecdochical representation of every story of lynching, Richard's body becomes the blood-stained gate, the term that Frederick Douglass uses to describe his own and a host of other slaves' interpolation into the system of slavery. In like manner, other lynch victims and their stories phenomenally populate Richard's body. Richard is thus stripped of his own individuality. He, like Aunt Hester and Mary Turner, is drained of his own suffering and the immediacy of his pain is absented by the demands of every other story he is called to stand in for. Thus Dunham's endeavor to bring pain close unavoidably

exploits the spectacle of Richard's pained body and "oddly confirms the spectral character of suffering [and consequently] effaces and restricts black sentience." Therefore in order to make this story the story of every one of them, Dunham had to volunteer, if not symbolically sacrifice, a body to the very beast that she wanted to defeat.

In *Southland's* Wake

The *Southland* premiere in Santiago ignited a spectrum of responses. The American embassy in Chile was furious that Dunham, a black woman "in a foreign country known for its strong Communist base and anti-American sentiment, had dared to expose America's darkest side."⁷⁷ The U.S. State Department had in fact advised Dunham during rehearsals in Santiago to "remove the lynching scene" (352-353). In response, she pushed back, insisting that "it must be done. If you don't want it done, you must assure me that this sort of thing is ended in the United States."⁷⁸ Needless to say, the show went on. On opening night, "the theater was packed, the audience cried and clapped, but the party of Americans present were terribly embarrassed and left in a huff."⁷⁹ Although Dunham hoped that *Southland* would compel her audience to abolish lynching, it seems that the party of Americans, shamed and embarrassed, many of whom were likely a part of the diplomatic core, were compelled to act, though not in the way Dunham had hoped.

Following the premiere, local reporters in Santiago were informed that "all newsprint [in Chile] would be withdrawn if anyone dared to write about *Southland*" (352). Dunham's own company members were strained from worry over the company's reputation, Dunham's reputation, and their own reputation, for, as principal dancer

Lucille Ellis explained years later, “Southland took [their] security blanket away. If we were run out of the country, where would we be? We were in limbo” (356). The protection and relative social ease that their artistry had created for them while on tour ultimately could not shield them from the racial realities they thought they had left behind in the United States. Miles away, these realities were suddenly thrust upon them once again, showing that haunting has no respect and takes no notice of time or space. “We were not ready to go into anything that was racial,” Ellis remembered, “because it was back to a history we wanted to rest” (356).

Although Dunham was surprised that her company didn’t want her to do *Southland* at all, she was not insensitive to their concerns: “Their idea in leaving America was to lose any feelings of racial difference, to try to forget what the whole thing was about”; yet *Southland* “took them down to the very bottom, to a reality they felt they had never known” (354-355). Company members’ insecurities no doubt intensified when they were forced to leave Santiago within days of the premiere. *Southland* had effectively been suppressed in the Chilean capital.

Indeed the responses—ranging from the suppression of *Southland* by the U.S. State Department and the intentional albeit forced disregard of the production by the local Santiago press, to the emotional turmoil expressed by her company—generated by the 1951 *Southland* premiere signal toward the political, diplomatic, and personal impact the ballet had on various groups. But Dunham was certain that she made the right decision in performing *Southland*. Although they did not perform it again on their South American tour, they did revive the show two years later when they played Paris. In a letter

that she wrote to her close friend Bernard Berenson, the highly-regarded art historian and critic, following the Paris opening of *Southland*, Dunham wrote:

I have not been approached by either Communists or the Communist press who I believe do not see anything, either in the ballet or in the material, for anti-American usage...In my heart of hearts, I know this has to be more good for the American government than even they know. It has proven to the world that the thing of which they are being accused every day, due to the acts of such people as Senator McCarthy, has not yet become a fact and that freedom of speech still remains one of our basic principles.⁸⁰

Dunham stood by her convictions. *Southland* played for a short while in Paris, though to mixed reviews.⁸¹ Some critics loved it, while others thought it too “cerebral” or “Sorbonnish,” while the Communists thought she hadn’t gone far enough to show her anger—they wanted “to see the burning of the body on stage.”⁸² Whatever the critics might have thought, the show didn’t fill the house on the evenings they performed it, so Dunham was forced to remove it from the bill. *Southland* had taken its toll. Dunham was “disappointed to have put so much of her creative energy into a ballet whose message, in dance form, the public could not yet accept.”⁸³ Following the run in Paris, she did not present it again. In an interview, she stated: “I was personally spent. I didn’t have the spiritual strength, because it takes that.”⁸⁴

However successful *Southland* was or was not as a creative or political piece, Dunham’s desire to tell the story of them all reveals the challenges of crafting a story of the African American past for those who have not yet said *yes* to ghostly confrontation. Reliant upon and at the same time burdened by the limits of existing discourse, artists like Dunham had to find a way to divine history where it never was in the hopes of shaping what it could potentially become. This was choreographed most vibrantly when *Southland* transitioned into the second scene. As Lucy dances her grief to the mournful strains of

“Strange Fruit” in the final moments of the first scene, the chorus gathers Richard’s body and takes him offstage.⁸⁵ The second scene picks up in an urban cafe, where patrons dance and enjoy what “substitutes they may find for the deprivations of their daily lives.”⁸⁶ Whereas the first scene establishes the simple earth dignity of the Negro, the comedies of cafe life in the final scene pulse with menace and threat. The young people dance in a “lowdown, earthy” kind of way, so that two dancing bodies meld into one slow-grinding mass.⁸⁷ Haunted by a “spirit of frenzied cynicism,” the young people try to find some “compensation for [their] tragedies.”⁸⁸

At the height of the tragi-comic diversions, the chorus-turned-funeral cortege bears Richard’s physical body through the cafe. The procession is “purely symbolic”; the cafe patrons do not see but sense the funeral procession, for “it is inconceivable that the essential tragedy of a people could escape them, even in the midst of pleasure.”⁸⁹ As Josephine Baker would have already known, pain lurks in even the jolliest of places. The blues music that had been playing suddenly stops as the cortege makes its way through the cafe. The dancers freeze. And then comes that profound moment of realization when one senses their

own tragic situation, which occurs at some time or another to all of us, intensified certainly in the lives of those people, in no matter what country, who are denied full freedom to enter into and partake of every aspect of the community in which they find themselves.⁹⁰

Armed with this new realization, a young boy drops his cards, a young girl cries. The music starts again, but in a minor key drawing the young dancers into a “sad, slow yet menacing dance.”⁹¹ Another young man plunges a knife into the floor again and again. One couple “bury themselves in the sexual embrace of a slow dance movement,” while yet “another couple dance disjointedly, heedlessly.”⁹²

In the course of telling the story of every lynching in the United States, Dunham choreographs in this final scene the collision between the ancestral burial ground and the living world. Richard wanders in death where he had not trekked in life, showing again how the dead honors no boundaries—temporal, geographic, or otherwise.⁹³ Instead Richard appears uninvited to the living and of his own accord, leaving his imprint in the disjointedness and hyperbole of their movements. They feel his presence, and even “absorb [his] tragic lynching through the sheer power of their dancing”⁹⁴; yet they still cannot call his name. *Beloved*. Cannot name that *something* that has just changed their lives forever. This was for Dunham the “true human tragedy—that [they can] feel but cannot define.”⁹⁵ The young patrons are caught in the pulls of articulation and expression; the absence of the former hyperbolizes the latter to the point of distortion. A distortion of tragic proportions. A distortion that registers a crisis of identity. A crisis that registers the need for ritual.

Chapter 2 (Dunham) Notes

¹ In “Katherine Dunham’s ‘Southland’: Protest in the Face of Repression,” dance historian Constance Valis Hill reports that an interview revealed that Dunham “[remembered] following the news of the trials which lasted from 1949-1951” (360-1 n21).

² Author Alex Heard explores the McGee case using court documentation, public records, correspondence, and oral histories in *The Eyes of Willie McGee: A Tragedy of Race, Sex, and Secrets in the Jim Crow South*. He writes about the celebrities who took up the cause, among them Josephine Baker, Paul Robeson, Richard Wright, Albert Einstein, Norman Mailer, and Frida Kahlo. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, however, “avoided taking part in a widely publicized campaign to stop the execution” (2), for she believed McGee “was a bad character and so was the white woman [he allegedly raped], so there [is] little that one could feel personally about” (2).

Josephine Baker talks about her involvement with the McGee case in her memoir *Josephine*, specifically about the emotional and financial support that she offered to McGee’s wife during the trials and prior to his execution. Biographers Phyllis Rose and Bennett Jules-Rosette also talk about Baker’s involvement in the case. See Rose’s *Jazz Cleopatra* and Bennetta Jules-Rosette’s *Josephine Baker in Art and Life*.

³ In “Inherently Unequal Justice: Interracial Rape and the Death Penalty,” Barbara Holden-Smith argues that the demise of lynching in the 1930s “did not end the Southern practice of executing blacks accused of raping white women” (1572). The lynch rope and noose, she continues, had been replaced by the electric chair and gas chamber. “Yet death at the hands of the state proved no more just than had death by the lynch mob. The trials of black men accused of raping white women were all too often mere ‘legal lynchings’—resulting sometimes from false charges and conducted in a manner that merely gave a passing nod to the procedural incidents of due process” (1572). I use the term here not as a determination of innocence or guilt on the part of either accused black men or accusing white women, but to show how a specter of extrajudicial lynching haunted the executions of these black men, even in the absence of a lynch mob.

⁴ I am leery of this triangulation made by the defense between black men, white women, and white men. The triangulation shadows the place and experiences of black women within the discourse on sexual threat, sexual terror, and the extent to which they are prosecuted and punishable by law, and how this varies based upon the race of the sexual perpetrator. Legal scholar Barbara Holden-Smith similarly identifies this triangulation in her comments on the race and gender dynamics of the Martinsville Seven case, and uses these dynamics to comment on the U.S. legal system in the American South. The disproportionate sentencing of black men to death for the crime of rape, she asserts, illustrates the extent to which the legal system took up the slack of punishing black men for the rape of white women following the demise of lynching as the primary instrument of social control in the 1930s. See Holden-Smith’s “Inherently Unequal Justice” for more on these ideas.

⁵ See Ida B. Wells-Barnett, “Southern Horrors,” *On Lynchings* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2002), 25-54, in which Wells-Barnett, a journalist, elaborates upon this triangulation.

⁶ Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 149.

⁷ John Perpener traces the history of black concert dance in *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*.

⁸ Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 143.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Ruth Beckford, *Katherine Dunham*, 106. Although Dunham and Baker established a good relationship, there was some competition and jealousy among the young women initially. Dunham shares with biographer Ruth Beckford how the company's presence in Paris "created a psychological reaction in her" (106). Baker hadn't appeared as much in the years following the war, and Dunham was not even sure that Baker was still as favorable to the French as she had been in previous years. Dunham was sure, however, that Baker was beloved and highly esteemed in European theater. Although Baker was an undisputed fixture in the Parisian music-halls, Dunham nonetheless determined that "Baker's immediate reaction was probably to accept [Dunham's success] as a challenge in her own field." Dunham continues: "As we got to know each other, we became friends. Everytime [sic] we performed in the same town, we made certain to make time to see each other. She called me her 'sister.' I think...whatever jealousy existed, I'm sure, must have been mine as well as hers" (106).

¹¹ Beckford, *Katherine Dunham*, 70.

¹² From an archival, simple typewritten, two-page document with the heading "SOUTHLAND" and parenthetically described as "English translation of prologue in Spanish as narrated by Katherine Dunham, Opera House, Santiago de Chile, January, 1951." This document is located in the folder labeled, "Misc. Manuscripts, 1950-1954" and is an English translation of another archival document titled "Tierra Del Sur" with the parenthetical note: "Prologue in Spanish as narrated by Katherine Dunham, Opera House, Santiago de Chile, January, 1951." I will use the English translation exclusively in this chapter and will refer to it in upcoming notes as "Santiago Prologue." Dunham notes in the Prologue that she had never witnessed a lynching first hand, but had "felt these things in spirit" (2).

¹³ From an archival, simple typewritten, paginated document with the heading "Concerning the ballet SOUTHLAND" and dated January, 1953, Palais de Chaillot, Paris. This document is located in the folder labeled, "Misc. Manuscripts, 1950-1954" and is an English translation of another archival document titled "A propos du ballet 'Southland,'" which, I presume, was distributed in the program notes during the Paris run of *Southland*. I will use the English translation exclusively in this chapter and will refer to it in upcoming notes as "Program Notes, Paris."

¹⁴ Dunham, "Santiago Prologue," 2.

¹⁵ From an archival one-page typewritten document titled "Extract from Programme Notes, Opera House, Santiago de Chile, January, 1951." This unpaginated document is located in the folder labeled, "Misc. Manuscripts, 1950-1954" and will be referred to in upcoming notes as "Programme Notes, Santiago."

¹⁶ Sander Gilman makes this argument in *Difference and Pathology*.

¹⁷ From an archival, simple typewritten, three-page, paginated document located in the folder labeled, "Misc. Manuscripts, 1950-1954" with the heading "SOUTHLAND," with the parenthetical note: "Working notes for Ballet SOUTHLAND, Santiago de Chile, Jan. 1951 Text used for rehearsal to build dramatization. Deleted for performance." The document includes the script that was the basis for mime and dance interpretation for the first scene of the performance; there is no script or notes for the second scene. The script is broken down into three acts: "Love Scene," which shows the romance between Richard and Lucy; "Fight," the shortest act, which shows the violent interaction between Julie and her lover Lenwood that leaves her unconscious beneath the magnolia tree; and "Accusation," during which Julie falsely accuses Richard of rape and he is lynched, leaving the black community in grief. I will refer to this document in upcoming notes as "Working Script."

¹⁸ See Koritha Mitchell's *Living with Lynching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930*. When writing about the lynching dramas by black women in the early 20th century, literary scholar Koritha Mitchell asks: "Why, then, do so many insist upon placing the label 'protest art' on creative works by African Americans that address lynching? Why do scholar analyses so frequently end with explanations of the extent to which such art responds to white supremacy?" (4). Mitchell is more interested in reading such creative works as "a continuation of African Americans' self-affirmation" (4), thus situating African American creative production such as lynching plays as cultural affirmation rather than reactionary.

¹⁹ Hill, "Katherine Dunham's *Southland*," 359.

²⁰ Aschenbrenner, *Dancing a Life*, 150.

²¹ Sara E. Johnson, introduction to *Kaiso!: Writings by and about Katherine Dunham*, eds. VèVè A. Clark and Sara E. Johnson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 9-10.

²² Katherine Dunham Papers, Southern Illinois University Archives. In Folder labeled, "Misc. Manuscripts, 1950-1954." There were in other folders documents containing musical scores. Additionally, even though *Southland* did not play after 1953, Dunham used choreography from the show in subsequent shows well throughout the 1950s, indicated on playbills with a note attesting to this fact.

²³ Katherine Dunham, *Touch of Innocence*, 15-16. Dunham explains that once her parents acquired the title to land in Glen Ellyn after the birth of her older brother, they soon laid the foundation and erected the framework of their new home. Neighbors were displeased to find that Albert, Dunham's father, was not just acting for or employed by her fair-skinned mother. Besides finding her parents an odd match, both racially and in terms of age, which they revealed with "unconcealed resentment," the neighbors also attempted to pressure the family out of the neighborhood, going as far as refiguring neighborhood zoning and even throwing a homemade bomb into the family's home, which, at this time, was still under construction. Dunham's father responded, "armed with a double-barreled shotgun, determination in his stride, murder in his eyes." The neighbors were not prepared for his reaction, or for the nightly vigil that "extended through that night, until the last coat of paint had been applied to the house and the carriage barn behind it."

²⁴ Johnson, "Introduction," 5.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Hill, "Katherine Dunham's *Southland*," 346.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ This is not to say, though, that Dunham lived a discrimination-free life while on tour. On the contrary, some of her company members were "threatened and insulted with racial slurs by American sailors" while playing in Genoa, Italy (Hill 348), and in the summer of 1950, "Dunham was denied entry into one of the better hotels because she was black, a bitter reminder of the pervasiveness of color prejudice" (348).

²⁹ See U.S. Senate Resolution 39 (S. Res. 39), 109th Congress, 1st Session "Apologizing to the victims of lynching and the descendants of those victims for the failure of the Senate to enact anti-lynching legislation," February 7, 2005. The resolution lists the number of lynch victims at 4,742 people, predominantly African American, between the years 1882 and 1968. By the time Dunham produced *Southland* in 1951, the crime of lynching had "succeeded slavery as the ultimate expression of racism in the United States following Reconstruction" and "was a widely acknowledged practice in the United States" (S. Res. 39). Lynching was used as a means of wielding and sustaining power in the face of mandates for slave manumission, and became the signature icon of American race hatred. Lynching claimed the lives of thousands of people, predominantly African Americans, and had been documented in all but four states (S. Res. 39).

³⁰ White, *Rope and Faggot*, 176.

³¹ S. Res. 39.

³² Santiago Prologue, 1.

³³ Dunham says: "North America is a great and wonderful country" but we may safely assume that she is referring specifically to the United States of America.

³⁴ Santiago Prologue, 1-2.

³⁵ Ibid., 2.

³⁶ See Trudier Harris' *Exorcising Blackness: Historical and Literary Lynching and Burning Rituals*.

³⁷ For more on literature about lynching at the turn of the 19th century, see Sandra Gunning's *Race, Rape, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912*.

³⁸ See Judith L. Stephens and Kathy A. Perkins, eds., *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*.

³⁹ See Koritha Mitchell's "Antilynching Plays: Angelina Weld Grimké, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, and the Evolution of African American Drama."

⁴⁰ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 4. Subsequent references to Douglass will be cited by page number in the text.

⁴¹ Morrison, "The Site of Memory," 70.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ "Negro Woman is Hanged by Brooks County Mob." *Atlanta Journal* 20 May 1918; "Georgia Huns Lynch Negro Woman and Three Men." *Baltimore Daily Herald* 20 May 1918. Both articles retrieved from "Historical Documents" on the *Remembering Mary Turner* website.

⁴⁴ Walter White, "The Work of a Mob," in *The Crisis*. Subsequent page references will be indicated in the text.

⁴⁵ The county newspapers in Georgia reported that six black people were killed in the lynching spree, although at least eleven were revealed through White's investigation, five of whom remained unidentified and unaccounted for. By White's account, Smith "bore a very poor reputation in the community because of ill treatment of his Negro employees" (221). Smith's "poor reputation" had, in fact, become so wide spread that he had difficulty securing and maintaining workers. To offset this difficulty, he adopted the practice of "going into the courts and whenever a Negro was convicted and was unable to pay his fine or was sentenced to serve a period in the chaingang, Smith would secure his release and put him to work out his fine on his (Smith's) plantation" (221). It was through this system of exchange—that is, securing freedom in exchange for debt peonage—that Smith met a black couple named Mary and Hayes Turner.

Mary and Hayes had a fraught relationship with Smith. As White explains, Smith had beaten Mary on several occasions. White does not explain why Smith unleashed his anger on Mary, under what circumstances he had access to her, or what *kind* of access Smith claimed. We know only that Hayes, Mary's husband, served at least one term in the chaingang for threatening Smith following one such incident (221).

⁴⁶ White writes that "each detail given is not the statement of a single person but each phase is related only after careful investigation and corroboration" (222).

⁴⁷ Armstrong, *Mary Turner and the Memory of Lynching*, 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Hill, "Katherine Dunham's *Southland*," 345.

⁵⁰ Hill, "Katherine Dunham's *Southland*," 347.

⁵¹ The following summary of the *Southland* dramatic plot is taken from the archival document "Program Notes, Paris."

⁵² See Ida B. Wells-Barnett's "Southern Horrors" for more on this issue.

⁵³ See Koritha Mitchell's "Anti-Lynching Plays" for more on this issue.

⁵⁴ All quotations in this paragraph taken from Dunham's "Program Notes, Paris."

⁵⁵ This excerpt and the quotations in the preceding paragraph taken from Dunham's "Working Script," 2.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Program Notes, Paris, 2.

⁵⁸ Marlon Ross, "Race, Rape, Castration: Feminist Theories of Sexual Violence and Masculine Strategies of Black Protest" *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theories: New Directions*, ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 309.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Dunham, "Program Notes, Paris," 2.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² The following dialogue is taken from Dunham, "Working Notes," 3.

⁶³ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 4.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ruth Beckford writes that "Julie had to act as well as dance to create the illusion of the imagined lynch mob that was forming offstage. She did a powerful series of movements as if to emotionally arouse the imaginary mob to attack and lynch [Richard]" (71).

⁶⁶ Beckford, *Katherine Dunham*, 71.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Dunham, "Program Notes, Paris," 2. This is the only source that I've found to date that mentions the burning flames and smell of burning flesh; as a result, I'm not sure how Dunham accomplishes this task.

⁶⁹ Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 5.

⁷⁰ Dunham, "Working Script," 2.

⁷¹ Dunham, "Program Notes, Paris," 2. The three quotes in the following paragraph are found on this page, as well.

⁷² Young, *Embodying Black Experience*, 167-208.

⁷³ I am inspired here by Joseph Roach's use of "surrogation" and Saidiya Hartman's idea of "phenomenal becoming." Roach describes "surrogation" as the means by which humans remember and culture subsequently happens. Surrogation considers how voids created by death, for instance, are filled by the communities who remain as a way to remember the deceased. However the void is never completely or absolutely filled; rather the jagged substitution requires remembering in a particular way, i.e., forgetting. Roach is clear that the process of filling those voids are the stuff of culture set in motion by the drama of and instantiates the very concept of performance.

Whereas Roach privileges the dead as the axis of his investigation, Hartman is interested in the living, and how violence is reproduced even in those moments of seeming amusement and fun. I am particularly interested in the way Hartman identifies the lingering presence of violence even in discourse that is formulated to alleviate suffering demonstrated, for instance, in abolitionist writing. Hartman, in fact, opens her book *Scenes of Subjection* with a reading of Douglass' recount of his Aunt Hester's beating, but as a way to call attention to the ease with which we recount other's pain. In both cases, Roach and Hartman describe a displacement of one's essence from their body and how that is replaced with something else, pointing toward the political, social, cultural, and historical implications such displacement illustrate.

⁷⁴ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 110. Subsequent references will be indicated in the text.

⁷⁵ I am inspired here by Saidiya Hartman's theorization of proxy in *Scenes of Subjection*, 17-48. She also offers a similar system for understanding phenomenal displacement that has been extremely useful in my understanding and use of the term.

⁷⁶ I am inspired here by Hortense Spillers' explanation of the way the flesh is scripted through discourse into a body; for more, see "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."

⁷⁷ Hill, "Katherine Dunham's *Southland*," 352. The remaining quotations are also taken from Hill's text; page citations will be noted in the text.

⁷⁸ Beckford, *Katherine Dunham*, 72.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Hill, "Katherine Dunham's *Southland*," 354.

⁸¹ Hill offers an overview of the reviews from the Paris run of *Southland*, 353-354. See also Beckford, *Katherine Dunham*, 72-73.

⁸² Hill, "Katherine Dunham's *Southland*," 354.

⁸³ Beckford, *Katherine Dunham*, 73.

⁸⁴ Hill, "Katherine Dunham's *Southland*," 354.

⁸⁵ The chorus' care stands in stark contrast to the Turner Family's interment. Lynched on Saturday evening, Hayes' body was left on display all day Sunday. "Hundreds of automobiles, buggies and wagons bore sightseers to the spot while many more tramped there on foot" (White 222). On Monday, he was cut from the tree and buried a few feet away by county convicts. His wife Mary and their baby were buried in a makeshift grave near the place where they died. Two young children, Ocie Lee and Leaster, grew up without parents, without their parents' bodies, without their birth names, without their youngest sibling as a result of the lynching spree that catapulted Hayes, Mary, and Baby Turner back into the ancestral burial grounds.

See C. Tyrone Forehand, "A Place to Lay Their Heads," *The Mary Turner Project*, accessed January 5, 2012. <http://www.maryturner.org>. Forehand was the great-grand nephew of Hayes and Mary Turner. *The Mary Turner Project*, a project spearheaded by the faculty and students of Valdosta State University's Women & Gender Studies Department, posted a short piece that Forehand wrote on the project website. Forehand writes that Hayes' parents asked for his body, but was denied. Between Forehand's and Walter White's 1918 report, Hayes was buried separately from his wife and unborn child. Also, Forehand mentions that Mary gave her two small children to family members for safekeeping after she found out she and Hayes were accused of complicity in Hampton Smith's death. The young children were raised by family members under assumed names. The Mary Turner Project strives for racial justice, healing, and reconciliation.

⁸⁶ Dunham, "Program Notes, Paris," 3.

⁸⁷ Beckford, *Katherine Dunham*, 72.

⁸⁸ Dunham, "Program Notes, Paris," 3.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Beckford, *Katherine Dunham*, 72.

⁹² Dunham, "Program Notes, Paris," 3.

⁹³ Sharon Holland, *Raising the Dead*, 18.

⁹⁴ Hill, "Katherine Dunham's *Southland*," 358.

⁹⁵ Dunham, "Program Notes, Paris," 3.

CHAPTER 3

Ntozake Shange and the Remedy of Ritual

I'm trying to create a land for us where we can live.
—*Poet Ntozake Shange*

Ritual presupposes crisis.
—*Playwright and drama critic Femi Euba*

Ntozake Shange's 1976 dramatic text *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf* opens up in some otherworld outside Chicago, Detroit, Houston, Baltimore, San Francisco, Manhattan, and St. Louis, where seven "colored girls" emerge out of darkness, harsh music, and dim lighting, frantically rushing onto and about the stage. Each girl is clothed in brown, yellow, purple, red, green, blue, or orange, and is similarly identified as the "Lady in Green," "Lady in Purple," "Lady in Red," etc. Amid their bustle, and without any apparent reason, they freeze in postures of distress. Fixed, hardened, seemingly unalterable, the colored girls' stillness is pronounced all the more, for there are no props, no extravagant scenery, no extraneous characters, and no prospect of aid. Not a single word has even been exchanged. There are only their seven rainbow-clad bodies framed by stillness, silence, and distress. After several moments, a lone spotlight picks up the Lady in Brown. She comes to life, and looks around only to find that all of the others are still.¹ She walks over to the Lady in Red and calls to her. But still overcome by her distress, "the Lady in Red makes no response." (3).

This collision of colors, silence, distress and stillness comprise the opening moments of a production written by Ntozake Shange, a black woman inspired by the bodies, sounds, words, histories, and mythologies of women. *for colored girls* ventures into the “dark phrases of [black] womanhood” that fall onto our ears like “distraught laughter” and “half-notes scattered/without rhythm” (3). Through dance, poetry, gesture, and song—the components of the *choreopoem*, a ritual-based theatrical form that Shange developed²—the seven “colored girls” wrap the audience in a garland of twenty poems that testify to the joys and “metaphysical dilemma” of being black, women, and alive.

Shange plunges us into this dilemma right away. In the opening moments, Shange communicates through crisis: the *crisis* of failed communication, the *crisis* of chaos, the *crisis* of failed community. The Lady in Brown experiences this first hand when she remains unacknowledged and unseen by the others after she comes to life. But crisis infects the other colored girls as well: frozen in postures of distress and the ensuing silence, they have no means of recourse: they are cut off from the power of community and individuality, and from the animating force of their own self-knowledge. Thus, in the opening moments, crisis not only introduces, structures and personifies the conflict in the production, but also discloses the colored girls as but shells of themselves—there but not *there*, feeling but not *feeling*.

The colored girls’ alienation from their power, community connection, sentience, and animating force is what I call a *crisis of estrangement*: there but not *there*; feeling but not *feeling*. This sense of disconnection resonates with what Katherine Dunham called the “true human tragedy” or that state in which one is hyperaware of a pressing heaviness that cannot be named or defined, yet cannot sidestep its influence or pull. As I showed

through my exploration of Dunham's 1951 production of *Southland*, Dunham's desire to bring the ills of racial hatred to the awareness of a predominantly white audience rested on the synecdochical premise that one story of lynching could tell the story of them all. By dramatizing this one story, however, the individuality, pain, and sentience of the lynch victim had to be evacuated or denied. The success of the production—that is, the extent to which the audience experienced the effects of racial hatred—not only depended upon the impact and vicarious experience of pain, but also depended upon the displacement or forceful expulsion of black (male) sentience and individuality. This displacement, as I have shown, illustrates the cutting edge, indeed the cruel slipperiness, of empathy.

The evacuation or denial of black sentience in this case was a cruel but inevitable byproduct of depicting the violent ritual of lynching. Despite Dunham's best intentions, *Southland* illustrates the peculiar vulnerability of depicting ritual—and, of course, performance more broadly speaking—as a means of portraying black community concerns for an assumed white audience. The crisis of estrangement that I identify in the opening moments of *for colored girls* situates Shange as an inheritor of the predicament Dunham encountered over two decades before. *for colored girls* and Shange as its creator are thus faced with the primary task of remedying the crisis of estrangement—a crisis, I argue, that is remedied by the ritual form of Shange's choreopoem.³ The ritual foundations of the choreopoetic form align with the nationalist theatrical conventions of the period espoused most formidably by poet-playwright Amiri Baraka. However, as I show in this chapter, Shange's choreopoetic form holds special promise: through the kinetics of dance and gesture, and the command of spoken poetry and music, the colored girls not only confront their own pasts—and to some degree the encompassing racial past

identified before in Dunham's and Baker's performances—but remedy their estrangement from their desires, community, and individuality. The promise of this specific form of performance lies in its capacity to function on several levels simultaneously: first, as a theatrical form; second, as a dramatic text; and third, as a yes to ghostly confrontation that ultimately reclaims black sentience and individuality. The multi-functionality of Shange's choreopoetic form enables a kind of heteroglossia—or a diversity of voices, stories, and experiences—to emerge. In the safety and protection of community, this heteroglossia climaxes in a fiery glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, that is reflected in the quiet, still moment (or “spell”) just before the colored girls' ecstatic display of emotion in the concluding moments of the production. Armed with the nationalist and feminist imperatives of the era, yet fashioning them in deific fashion into something that works for *black women* particularly, Shange's choreopoem accomplishes the “something-to-be-done” in ways that neither Baker nor Dunham did: rather than only depicting the haunting quality of the African American past, the choreopoem empowered black people and black women particularly to act on their own behalf. This, I show, is the promise of the choreopoem, a foray into the ancestral grounds that unlocks the demarcations between the mundane and the metaphysical, and between artistry and political agency.

Summoning the Choreopoem

for colored girls reflected with the urgency of the times.⁴ The triumph of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 were overshadowed by the crushing reality of 1965: Malcom X's assassination in February; the audacity of the Moynihan Report in March; July riots in Watts. Then Newark's bloody July in 1967,

followed by Detroit one week later. Following that, the blow of Martin Luther King's death in 1968. With the death of the golden child of the Civil Rights Movement, "praying, waiting, singing, and everything white" were now out of vogue.⁵ The garbage workers' assertions that "I am a man" were met with "Black Power Now!" Everything on the cultural front had to be overhauled: "black poems, plays, paintings, novels, hairstyles, and apparel" had to become even blacker, had to somehow resonate with the hurt and indignation of people who were tired of hurt and indignation, but who found warmth and promise in the fire it fueled. The Women's Movement felt the fire. So did the major cultural movements of Asian Americans, Chicanas/os, Native Americans, and Gays and Lesbians. And as the fires died out, Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies Departments appeared in the still smarting ash.⁶

It was into and out of this turbulent and transformative time that Shange emerged as a new poetic voice. By the time *for colored girls* played in New York as a full-fledged theatrical production, black theatre generally had begun to move from formal structure of mimesis, or theatrical realism realized through the project of representation. In its stead, theatrical practices among black practitioners were moving toward methexis, or the ritual-infused performance that was characteristically participatory and collectively co-created between audience and players. The demands of the post-Civil Rights era necessitated this change from passive theatricality to a theatrical form that held the capacity to heal the black psyche, and also create the space for teaching and fortifying the black community. The pedagogical imperative examined in Dunham's *Southland* in the previous chapter shifts from teaching whites about black suffering to teaching black people that their suffering was rooted within white capitalist structures of domination. Within this

tradition, theatre was no longer a product to be consumed, but a practice and process of individual and community healing and empowerment.

The greatest proponent of such an approach to theatre was Amiri Baraka, who in a 1965 article entitled “The Revolutionary Theatre” called for a radical black theatrical convention, and urged black people to free themselves from their suffering by any means necessary.⁷ But in black nationalist form, Baraka’s theatrical sermon was steeped in male chauvinism and rooted in the progress of “the people” rather than in the experiences of the individual. This meant, then, that the experiences of women were largely unacknowledged in his work. Shange “recognized the absence of women’s complex perspectives in [Baraka’s] revolutionary sermons” (Lester 276). Yet, she counts Baraka among her primary influences and recalls his Preface to a *Twenty Volume Suicide Note* as one of “the two books that changed [her] entire perspective of the world.” She continues:

I have to pay homage to [Amiri Baraka], because if it weren’t for [him] I wouldn’t have the courage to do what I do, even though we’re so disparate in terms of style and politics...Amiri gave me the right to be as intimate as I felt like being; to use what history I chose to use as my jumping-off point; to be as international as I wanted, or as obscure as I wanted if the piece demanded it. He also gave me the right to be insolent. (276)

By Shange’s account, Baraka gave her permission to bare her soul, to use theatre to create new histories, and to transgress the boundaries of traditional theatrical conventions. Yet, Shange remained leery of a black theatrical style that focused on “the people,” the collective, at the expense of the black individual, and the black woman in particular.

Although Shange could learn from Baraka “how to make language sing & penetrate one’s soul” (277), and even confessed in *for colored girls* that “every word outta [Baraka’s] mouth waz gospel,” (13), she was committed, nonetheless, to carving out a space for the voices of black women.

Whatever Shange and her collaborators “[discovered] in themselves [at a local California bar in December 1974], had been in process among [them] for almost two years” (ix). Only a short while before, Shange began a series of poems that explored the lives of seven different women. These poems were modeled on Judy Grahn’s *The Common Woman*, a collection of poems written in straightforward language about “the common woman” who, despite the nondescript tag, grappled with the markings that gender, sexuality, and class left on her daily life. Following Grahn’s model, Shange’s poems were “numbered pieces: the women were to be nameless & assume hegemony as dictated by the fullness of their lives” (xii). Pulling away from the era’s revolutionary demands for a theatre that was *for* the people, Shange was instead compelled to offer a deep look into the fullness of women’s lives:

I feel that as an artist my job is to appreciate the differences among my women characters. We’re usually just thrown together, like “tits and ass,” or a good cook, or how we can really ‘f- - .’ Our personalities and distinctions are lost. What I appreciate about the women whom I write about, the women whom I know, is how idiosyncratic they are.⁸

By mining her characters’ lives for their those distinctions, they would not be the girlfriend, the wife, the mother, the sister, or other tangential figure. Rather, the women she wrote about would “assume hegemony,” and their lives, varied, rich, and complex, would be the axes around which the entire production revolved.

The collection of poems was originally called “*☞ this is for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*” and continued to be called by this name during all subsequent San Francisco performances. Beginning with their show at the Bacchanal, a women’s bar outside Berkeley, California, Shange worked tirelessly alongside musicians and dancers to set up the pieces and clean up the poems. Committed still to bringing her

work to the community, she used the space that she knew, including women's studies departments, bars, cafes, & poetry centers. The growing importance of improvisation as a defining quality of her theatrical style was reflected in her observation:

With the selection of poems changing, dependent upon our audience & our mood, & the dance growing to take space of its own, so that Paula inspired my words to fall from me with her body, & The Sound Clinic working with new arrangements of Ornette Coleman compositions & their own, The Raggae Blues Band giving Caribbean renditions of Jimi Hendrix & Redding, we set dates for Minnie's Can-Do Club in Haight-Ashbury. The poets showed up for us, the dancers showed up for us, the women's community showed up, & we were listed as a 'must see' in *The Bay Guardian*. (xiii)

Here, Shange identifies all of the aspects that would comprise her choreopoem form: music, poetry, dance, a vibrant audience. Improvisation provided the glue that bound these elements together, as well as an attentiveness to "mood" and performance climate. Whereas these aspects became the foundation for the choreopoem, they are also the basic components of what came to be known as ritual drama in the 1970s. In accordance to the revolutionary theatrical demand that all theatre should be life changing for the people, ritual drama was rooted in a methexical approach to drama. The audience should expect and should have a right to expect performance that was rooted in their life experiences. Carrying the power of ritual, then, as both a performance, and as a process of healing, the methexical approach was germane and appealing to Shange, whose female character base was, as she suggested, among those who needed the most healing, the most remembering. The ritual foundation of the choreopoem—evidenced in the witnessing forms of poetry, music, and dance—enabled a kind of remembering that, as I explore later in this chapter, had mundane, spiritual and political implications.

By the time Shange wrote the preface to the dramatic text of *for colored girls* in 1976, the exploration of black womanhood was already an imperative among many black

women writers. The momentum generated by this exploration, holding well into the 1980s, established some of the canonical literature by black women writers. We have only to consider Toni Morrison's novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973), and *Song of Solomon* (1977); Toni Cade Bambara's edited collection *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970) and novel *The Salt Eaters* (1980); Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* (1982); Gloria Naylor's novel *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982); and the "black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet" Audre Lorde's biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982). Positioned chronologically between the rallying call "Black is Beautiful!" and the impending conservatism of the 1980s, these works by black women writers explored the terrains of black womanhood within both contemporary and historical frameworks.⁹ They relied on and created innovative ways—from Walker's epistolary form in *The Color Purple* to Naylor's portraiture style in *The Women of Brewster Place* and Lorde's genre-bending literary style that she called the biomythography—to relay their stories. Their commitment to narrating the lives of black people nodded to the waning mandates of the Black Arts Movement, yet through their particular exploration of black women's lives and individuality, also rejected its masculine chauvinism. As a result, their literary work became a resting place for black women's lived and shared experiences.

Shange's desire to capture the poetry of women's lives situates her squarely within this sisterhood of women novelists, who explored similar themes. Although Shange's desire would lead her to write novels *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), *Betsey Brown* (1985), *Liliane* (1995), and *Some Sing, Some Cry* (2010), the release of *for colored girls* in the 1970s also locates her within the circle of black women dramatists who were using the theatrical stage to similarly contemplate black identity in the United States, beginning as early as

1959 with Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. Within this framework, the women dramatists also explored gender and questions of black womanhood particularly. We might think here of *Wedding Band: A Love/Hate Story in Black and White* (1966) and *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969) by Alice Childress; and the series of ritual performances including *The Ritual: To Regain Our Strength and Reclaim Our Power* (1971), *A Revival: Change/Loge Together/Organize!* (1972), *Soljourney Into Truth* (1974), and *Soul Fusion* (1980) created and directed by Barbara Ann Teer and performed by her company at the National Black Theatre in Harlem. Childress' interrogation of black identity and Teer's ritual evocations of black soul stand alongside the more surreal, fantastic work of playwright Adrienne Kennedy, whose *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964) and *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* (1976) plunge into the psyche of black women confronting racism and its assault on their identities. Despite their differences in style and preferred theatrical convention, these black women dramatists trudged into new dramatic territory, their works demarcating the point at which black women not only narrated black lives, but also figured prominently as directors and producers in bringing these narrations to life.

As the youngest of these playwrights and novelists (with the exception of Gloria Naylor), Shange stands as a beneficiary of their groundbreaking work. *for colored girls* marks this legacy's convergence with a shared and formative mandate of Women's Studies, which Shange identifies as a crucial component of her artistic and personal development: namely, the excavation of women and women's voices—silenced by racial, gender, sexual, class and other categorical oppressions—from the rubble of the American past. Shange's prefatory remarks about the evolution of *for colored girls* from a collection of poems into a full-fledge production touch upon the specific role that dance played in

connecting her to this past. Speaking about her stint in an African dance troupe, Shange writes that “the depth of my past waz made tangible to me in [Raymond] Sawyer’s *Ananse*, a dance exploring the Diaspora to contemporary Senegalese music, pulling ancient trampled spirits out of present tense Afro-American Dance” (xi). Here, Shange establishes a relationship between black performance and the black past; more precisely, she recognizes dance as the means of extracting the past—those “ancient trampled spirits”—from silences seen in history and in her own self knowing. Dance substantiated her feeling that a woman’s spirit and mind had been entrusted to her; for through dance, she “discovered [her] own body more intimately that [she] had imagined possible” (xi).

She continues:

with the acceptance of my thighs and backside, came a clearer understanding of my voice as a woman and as a poet. The freedom to move in space, to demand of my own sweat a perfection that could continually be approached, though never known, waz [sic] poem to me, my body and mind ellipsing, probably for the first time in my life. (xi)

Dance brought her unconscious knowing of race, gender—of being a “colored woman”—into what she called a “known everydayness.” Her understanding of the relationships between dance, the past, and cultural memory greatly reflect those theorizations of dance offered by Katherine Dunham and Josephine Baker in the preceding chapters, particularly in the way her dancing body served as a repository for cultural memory—a lesson that came, she says, “if we worked, if we opened up, if we made the dance our own” (xi).

For Shange, who identified primarily as a poet, dance and poetry were thus at the heart of the choreopoem. Theatrical scholar Neal Lester identifies Shange's

“choreopoem” as her “most significant contribution to the stage.”¹⁰ He defines the choreopoem as

a theatrical expression that combines poetry, prose, song, dance, and music—those elements that, according to Shange, outline a distinctly African American heritage—to arouse an emotional response in an audience. As a theatrical expression, the choreopoem emerges from an African tradition of storytelling, rhythm, physical movement, and emotional catharsis.¹¹

Performance artist Robbie McCauley first encountered this dramatic form when she joined the Broadway company of *for colored girls* in 1977. McCauley attests to Lester’s definition of the choreopoem and offers further insight on the form, which is quoted at length:

[The choreopoem] demands that the performer have an organic, physical relationship to the words and images of the poems/narratives...in order to perform Shange's text, the actor has to personalize her relationship to it. (I mean personalize as an acting process wherein the actor involves herself experientially and imaginatively with the text...to play it through herself.) I'd say that the form is musical--that a broad range of Black classical music (Jazz, Blues, Rhythm and Blues) informs the work. By this I mean that the performer brings her own musical sense to the text and she will find that the music lives there. Note that I'm describing an actor's work to come to it with some knowledge or strong instinct about how to give it voice. And, of course, there is a physical life in the text. The actor deals with inner rhythms in giving voice to text. Shange's work demands that inner rhythms be physicalized. And of course each actor finds her own way of doing this.¹²

By McCauley’s account, the embodiment of character within the choreopoetic form carries the actor’s autobiographical imprint, and, furthermore, mirrors the improvisory character of jazz, the blues, and R&B. Therefore, musicality animates and provides the guiding structures of the form, and is identifiable even in the “physical life [of] the text” itself. McCauley’s focus on improvisation resonates with ritual practitioner and scholar Malidoma Somé’s notion that “rituals never like to be done the same way twice, for they would rather reflect the versatility of human imagination than its corresponding power to

create stagnation and rigidity.”¹³ Personifying ritual in this way, both Somé and McCauley point toward a vibrant and dynamic interchange between the ritual form and ritual participants—an interchange that Shange depended upon for the success of her production.

Somé’s and McCauley’s personification of ritual and its musicality point toward a creative expression that derived its force from Shange’s text, the ritual form itself, and the actor’s interpretation and interaction with both. To physicalize the inner rhythms was, as McCauley asserted, an individual and singularly emotional journey for each actor. Therefore, the choreopoetic form empowers “actors to experience and to communicate [Shange’s] drama personally and individually” and demands a dynamic relationship between body, music, poetry, and form. Choreographer Diane McIntyre, with whom Shange has danced and collaborated, furthers this idea in her comments on the choreopoem:

Choreopoem is an ancient [African] form—words and movement happening simultaneously. It’s natural. [Ntozake] made a name for it. The uniqueness of the form as I know it and have worked with it, is that the words are not separate over there and danced to. The words and dance become one--intertwined so you couldn’t imagine one without the other. It feels very natural to me--but it is somewhat daring. You have probably seen other people use the form, but it often doesn’t work as well as with [Ntozake’s] poetry. Her words have the music and the dance in it and the words also have space that is open for the dance (like abstract music) whereas some other poetry may be so explicit that movement with it is redundant.¹⁴

By McIntyre’s estimation, Shange’s poetry was “open” enough for dance, musical enough to engage in a call-and-response with the body. As McIntyre explained, these conjoined forms was not particularly new to black performance; however, Shange’s particular focus demanded that the form *do* different cultural work: namely accommodate the experiences of black women.

Shange talks more about this in a 1989 interview with the African-American activist-scholar Angela Davis. Shange reported that she was “interested in creating vehicles for people [of color and women] who can’t exist in [European artistic] forms.”

She continues:

My characters cannot exist in those forms. So I have to make a place where they can live...I try to make a place where my voices can be heard, where they can move around, they can dance or they can hear music that they want to hear...I’m trying to create a land for us where we can live.¹⁵

Shange’s characters, most of whom are black women and men, cannot exist within the conventional structures of American literature and theatre. The rigidity of these cultural forms, she suggests, cannot and does not (even want to) accommodate the experiences of the communities that she writes about.

Combat Aesthetic: A Living Remedy

Without that form, the implication is that the characters—the colored girls—are not living. There but not there, feeling but not feeling, their condition mirrors the crisis of estrangement revealed in the opening moments of the production. In the service, or perhaps under the guise of surviving, they are far removed from their deepest knowing, and have grown suspicious of their right to feeling, community, and individuality. The *Lady in Blue* expresses this sense of estrangement most straightforwardly and most poignantly. In “no more love poems #3”, she observes:

we deal wit emotion too much
so why dont we go ahead & be white then/
& make everythin dry & abstract wit no rhythm & no
reelin for sheer sensual pleasure...
lets think our way outta feelin (44)

Here, the Lady in Blue follows fourteen other poems in which the colored girls have confessed to abortion, rape, and the desires that go unheard and unrecognized in the worlds they inhabit, and even by the men that they love. Frustrated by the messiness of feeling, the Lady in Blue suggests that they become something unlike themselves, something that she feels is beyond the reach of feelings and their own nature. But, as she realizes, acquiring some peace at the expense of her feelings comes with its own cost: it is abstract, a condition contrived by the rational mind at the exclusion of body, emotion, and spirit. It results in and returns to the hazy incongruence from which the play began, a rhythmless friction that yields no sensual pleasure. Yet for this colored girl, forsaking her birthright to individuality and sentience is much more amenable to her survival. Try though she might to swerve from messiness of feeling, she nonetheless and inevitably runs head on into an unforgiving estrangement.

The Lady in Blue's sense of estrangement resonates with poet Audre Lorde's notion of the pornographic. By Lorde's account, pornography is "the suppression of true feeling, [which] emphasizes sensation without feeling."¹⁶ In this state, the Lady in Blue's capacity to feel fully is diminished. But the audacity to connect to and express the deepest of feelings was met with labels like "evil woman," "bitch," and "nag." And in "tryin not to be [those things]," as fellow colored girl Lady in Orange observed in "no more love poems #1" (42), the Lady in Blue resonates with the notion that her poem was really a requiem for herself "cuz [she] had died in a real way" (43). Without a place to live, the colored girls are pushed toward estrangement and requiem—the very dilemmas that Shange wants to address and remedy through the form of the choreopoem. Aware of the

demands of her objective, Shange fortifies herself with something that literary scholar Tejumola Olaniyan calls the “combat aesthetic.”¹⁷

Combat aesthetic derives from “combat breathing,” an idea that philosopher Frantz Fanon writes about within the context of Algerian decolonization. The schema he draws, however, is sadly familiar:

There is no occupation of territory, on the one hand, and independence of persons on the other. It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation that are contested, disfigured, in the hope of final destruction. Under this condition, the individual’s breathing is an observed, an occupied breathing. It is a combat breathing.¹⁸

By Fanon’s account, the daily pulsations of occupied territory and persons under occupation cannot be unraveled from the systemic oppressions that ultimately seek their demise. Occupation, then, is persistent, demanding—a source of exhaustion and distraction. And in the interest of making it just one more day, those who live under occupation, like the Lady in Blue, are subject to estrangement, which in turn feeds the occupation machine. This state of agony, exhaustion, and occupation—the crisis of estrangement—is the condition of occupied life.

Yet, a “veritable weapon” is embedded within Fanon’s idea too, one that Shange taps into through her creation of the choreopoem.¹⁹ When used in the hands of the occupied, combat breathing is not only wielded against occupational forces and estrangement, but is also, as Shange suggests, “the living response/ the drive to reconcile the irreconcilable.”²⁰ As a *living response*, combat breathing, and by extension the choreopoem, confronts “the involuntary constrictions [and] amputations of [the occupied’s] humanity.”²¹ Therefore, through the use of the choreopoetic form, the colored girls are not only equipped to overthrow occupational forces, but to also clarify

and remedy their constricted and amputated humanity. They create a place in which they can live.

The poem “somebody almost walked off wid alla my stuff,” a piece spoken by the Lady in Green, dramatizes the condition and the remedy of combat breathing. When she begins her story, someone has walked away with all of her stuff. “this is mine/this aint yr stuff,” she says. “now why dont you put me back & let me hang out in my own self?” (49). The Lady in Green is situated here as occupied territory: there but not *there*; feeling but not *feeling*. Sometimes pleading, sometimes musing, sometimes mournful, the Lady in Green is ever urgent: “I want my stuff back” (50). Crippled by estrangement and the constrictions of her humanity, “stuff,” I argue, equals soul, or that animating life-force that Audre Lorde has called “the erotic.”²² Without a soul, the Lady in Green is occupied, estranged from her truest self and from the power and support of her matrilineal lineage. Only the shell of her body remains. The Lady in Green wonders: “what can anybody do wit somethin of no value on a open market?” (49).

But through her testimony, the Lady in Green recognizes her situation. Sustained by the rhythm generated by the group dance in the previous poem, and, riding the momentum, she demands her self back:

I want my stuff back/
My rhythms & my voice. (50)

Desperately needing to reclaim her occupied body, the Lady in Green recounts how she lost her stuff:

[he] was a man faster
n my innocents/was a lover/I made too much
room for/almost run off wit alla my stuff/
& i didn't know i'd give it up so quik/ & the one running wit it/
dont know he got it/ & i'm shoutin this is mine/ & he dont

know he got it/ my stuff is the anonymous ripped off treasure
of the year/ did you know somebody almost got away with me/
me in a plastic bag under their arm/ me
danglin on a string of personal carelessness (51)

Riding the momentum, the Lady in Green must confront her occupier. She wants her stuff back, and begins her reclamation project by naming the missing pieces: her name, her “perfect ass,” and her laugh. She continues:

my love my toes my chewed
up finger nails/ niggah/ wif the curls in yr hair/
mr. louisiana hot link/ I want my stuff back/
my rhythms & my voice (50)

The Lady in Green goes from a list of what has been taken to a reclamation of her desire:

i wants my things/
i want my arm wit the hot iron scar/ & my leg wit the
flea bite/ i want my calloused feet & quik language back
in my mouth/ fried plantains/ pineapple pear juice/
sun-ra & joseph & jules/ i want my own things/ how i lived them/
& give me my memories/ how i waz when i waz there/
you cant have them or do nothin wit them/
stealin my shit from me/ dont make it yrs/ makes it stolen (50)

The choreopoetic form enables the Lady in Green to work through her situation, first recognizing her occupied condition, then confronting her occupier. As a result, she acquires clarity by returning to the site of pain, touching again the hurt that lingered there. In so doing, she reclaims how she was when she was there before, returning full force to a prediscursive moment *prior* to estrangement, *prior* to discourse, *prior* to the chaos in which she has lived up until this point, *prior* to her severance from her matrilineage. Through this ritual of return, this colored girl remedies her constricted and amputated humanity and remembers how to live.

The Lady in Green’s return was uniquely experienced, though not singularly achieved. Learning to live again was revealed only through the clamor of the colored

girls' testimonies. The collision of stories and voices—a discursive diversity welcomed by the openness of the dramatic text and articulated through improvisation—became the throughway to the ancestral burial grounds, a return that was collectively undertaken, and a journey to healing that was collectively shared. The colored girls' collaboration mirrors the collaborative nature of ritual as well as the spirit in which *for colored girls* was created.

for colored girls was first presented at the Bacchanal, a women's bar outside Berkeley, California and was a collaborative project from the onset. Working with dancers, musicians, poets, and publishers, Shange says simply:

We just did it. Working in bars waz a circumstantial aesthetic of poetry in San Francisco...with as much space as a small studio on the Lower East Side, the five of us, five women, proceeded to dance, make poems, make music, make a woman's theater for about twenty patrons. This was December of 1974. We were a little raw, self-conscious, & eager. Whatever we were discovering in ourselves that nite had been in process among us for almost two years. (ix)

Although San Francisco “waz inundated with women poets, women's readings, & a multi-lingual woman presence,” which Shange “desperately appreciated,” the reading scene was largely predominated by male poets. Nonetheless, she and other women poets found and created places in bars, cafes, and on university campuses where they could share their work. Shange recalls that, “the force of these readings on all our lives waz to become evident as we directed our energies toward clarifying our lives—& the lives of our mothers, daughters, & grandmothers—as women...This is the energy & part of the style that nurtured *for colored girls*...” (ix-x).

The instability of the social reading scene was balanced by the more stable source of “inspiration & historical continuity” that she received at the Women's Studies Program at Sonoma State College. The institutionalization of Women's Studies represents a critical moment for Shange's development, both in the sense that it officially

institutionalized the scholarly study of women's experiences; and in the sense that the discipline gave Shange the tools and the permission to pursue her interest in excavating women's pasts. It was within the space of the Ivory Tower that she came to understand the "woman's mind & spirit" as well as the "female heritage & imperative" that had been entrusted to her (xi). The courses that she took and taught focused on women as artists, poets, and writers, and were "inextricably bound to the development of [her] sense of the world, [herself], and women's language" (x). For example, Shange's research on women's mythologies from antiquity to the present led to *Sechita*, one of the most discussed poems in the *for colored girls* choreopoem.

"Sechita" is special in that it is the only of the twenty poems that comprises *for colored girls* that is not set in the colored girls' contemporary era, but in the era of "quadroon balls" (23) and "creole carnivals" (24) raised along the Mississippi River in ports like St. Louis, Missouri and Natchez, Mississippi. Sechita is a "dance hall girl perceived as deity, as slut, as innocent & knowing" (x). Sechita's description is in line with contemporary references to Josephine Baker as the "African Eros," "Black Venus," and "African frenzy." Both Sechita and Baker, like Sara Baartman before them, are entangled in the history of black female display. Working in "patch-work tents" and under "stale lights"—as Baker likely did in the "chittlin' circuit" days before heading to Paris; and as Sechita did too as she took to the makeshift stage, where gold pieces hit her "tween her thighs" (25)—both women seemingly reflected the chaos of their times, and bore the (black female) burdens of their mothers' times. Although Sechita and Baker were similarly bedecked in light skin and excessive costumes, they were still black women whose skin, tinged with grit, darkness, and "the heavy dust of the delta," performed its own drama—

a drama in which “god seemed to be wiping his feet in [their faces]” (24). And when each woman used the mirror to decorate their faces, something unlike themselves looked back, for the fun-house mirror “made her forehead tilt backwards/ her cheeks appear sunken/ her sassy chin only large enuf/ to keep her full lower lip/ from growing into her neck” (24). No matter though: both women “learned to make allowances for the distortions” (24).

Narrated by the Lady in Purple and danced-improvised by the Lady in Green, “Sechita” works through the distortions associated with being black and female. Adorned in splendid “gin-stained n itchy” red garters, “blk-diamond stockings darned wit yellow threads/[and] an ol starched taffeta can-can,” Sechita’s gaze into the mirror tells us something about the pain that she, and perhaps Baker, experienced as women who performed for predominantly white, and in Sechita’s case white male, audiences. Sechita numbed her pain with hard whiskey and made her face immobile, “like nefertiti/ approachin her own tomb” (25). She had already, as the Lady in Blue urged, thought herself out of feelin and was now the embodiment of the pornographic, separated from her truest feelings. However, Sechita used this severance as best as she could. The overtones of sexuality—heightened all the more by its embodiment through the Lady in Green’s improvisation—become a way of owning her sexuality, and more importantly, a way of asserting through performance the power of sex as both a scene of subjection and a scene of introspection and self knowing. Through the immediacy of body and improvisation, and through its reformulation of women’s sexuality, “Sechita” is a tribute to the women who have been burdened historically by these gender conventions.

At the same time, Shange's "Sechita" points to the concept of "woman" and "womanhood" as constructs that are both historically specific and accumulative. On the one hand, her dance allows her to challenge "woman" as an uncritical synonym for ready, sexual availability. Thus through her dance performance, she attains and asserts personal agency. On the other hand, however, Sechita is well aware of how she is perceived by her male spectators. To the rowdy mob that looks on while she dances, she—a descendant of the peculiar lusts of American slavery—is not simply a dancing girl; rather she carries on her (octoroon) racially marked body the weight of a racially, sexually, and gender inflected subjugation that begins not with her, but with the generations of enslaved women before her. She is thus a vehicle—continuously remade through both the white male gaze and her own dance-improvisation—for the fulfillment of male lusts and desires, precisely because she epitomizes the accumulation of her many mothers' subjection. Like Baker, again, Sechita inherits the burden of their history, but through her dance creates some room for her own response, her own story.

The specificity of Sechita's story represents the goal and the challenge of *for colored girls*: to identify a shared black woman's history of subjugation and at the same time to carve spaces into that history for singular, individual stories. The Beloved-like figures and all of those down there in the ancestral burial grounds loiter uneasily in Sechita's story, lending themselves as backdrop to the Lady in Purple's poetic narration and to the Lady in Green's dance-improvisation. Sechita invites us to think about the innumerable black women who endured similar circumstances. But she also illustrates how the ritual underpinnings of the choreopoem toggles between the synecdochical and the individual, at once reflecting the universal racial and woman-centered imperatives of Black

Revolutionary Theatre and Women's Movement, respectively, and the emerging *womanist* sentiments expressed by a host of black women writers and dramatists in the coming years.²³

Àshe: A Land Where We Can Live

Sechita's story, thrust into the middle of the production, represents a special moment in *for colored girls*. Sechita's dancing body adds yet another discursive voice to the heteroglossia set in motion by the choreopoetic form. Moreover, it reveals the deep-rootedness of black women's estrangement as a lingering, ghostly presence that attaches itself to the condition of being both black and female in the United States. In the 18th century white male world that she inhabits, Sechita's work as a "dance hall girl" or "slut" is almost redundant, for, like Baker who would follow in her footsteps years later in her conga performance, Sechita's dancing symbolically summons forth the other mothers—those Beloved-like figures—from down there. Caught in the throes of her dance hall performance, "legs [slashing] furiously thru the cracker nite" and kicking viciously, "catchin stars tween her toes" (25), Sechita becomes the face of unresolved, lingering pain.

Locating the ghostly amid the merriment of the creole carnival reveals the scaffolding of systematic racial and gender oppressions, and the mechanics by which it perpetuates itself in black women's lives. I do not intend to dilute the role such matrices of power play in Sechita's and other black women's pain, but I do want to emphasize that this is not the only or even primary motivation for the return to the ancestral burial grounds. When regarded only from the position of appointing blame, black women

become *reactors*, their subjectivity ever beholden to white male desire. But if Sechita carves out a space for herself amid the comings-and-goings of ancestral figures and under stale carnival lights; if a symbolic return to past pains lends itself to distinguishing Sechita from the vast collectives birthed by racism and sexism; if we dare, as Shange did, situate black women as agents and allow them to assume full hegemony, then the ancestral burial grounds must be more than the continued throbbing and legacy of ill-healed wounds. Embedded within the return is also hope, comfort, and strength.

Sechita's story creates the framework for a deeper exploration of the journey from pain to hope, which I undertake at the end of this chapter in my reading of "a nite with beau willie brown" and "a laying on of hands," the closing two poems, and in the following chapter. For the moment, however, I want to highlight that Shange achieves this movement from pain to hope through the structures of the choreopoem, a form that "was not rooted to the idea that white people had about us, that was not rooted to our relationship to white people, and that had *solely to do with how we respond to being alive on the planet.*" By directing her attentions inward, Shange was able to "discern...what things were or were not functioning well for [black communities]." ²⁴ What becomes discernible through stories like Sechita's is the troubled social identities that black women inherit, and the incessant need to create support:

unearthing the mislaid, forgotten, &/or misunderstood women writers, painters, mothers, cowgirls, & union leaders of our pasts proved to be both a supportive experience & a challenge not to let them down, not to do less than—at all costs not be less woman than—our mothers. (x)

Shange's excavation of the mislaid, forgotten and misunderstood—or her foray into the ancestral burial grounds—yields a line of matrilineal support. Consorting with these Beloved-like figures and the pain that it recalls is a challenge, but one that lands Shange in

an aura that writer Gloria Naylor might call “female communion,” or the idea of “the company of women...[that has evolved] by necessity and [triumphed] through courage and love.”²⁵ Situating herself as a daughter of these women writers, painters, mothers, cowgirls, and union leaders, Shange claims a shared, distinctly female genealogy, a *matrilineage*. In so doing, Shange fortifies herself, at once willing herself to not let them down and at the same time summoning the support to document the lives of black women and their response to being alive on the planet.

Through introspection and performance, Shange, like Sechita, comments on the lingering presence of the past. Whereas the past lingered in both the Baker and Dunham chapters as a previous moment of suffering and terror that was experienced either first hand or vicariously by way of the performance event, *for colored girls* emerges as the consequence or the presumption of that past. In other words, the colored girls’ testimonies reveal what it has been like to live in the aftermath of such terror—that is, to live all too often without the *known* knowledge and support of their matrilineage. Shange does not resort to visual grotesqueries to communicate this: there is nothing like a lynched body to which Dunham resorted, nor is there the visual exuberance that was found in Baker’s performance of the conga. Instead, that past lingers in and is recreated through kinesthetic and spoken poetry, and Shange documents and responds to it as the lived aftermath of the past.

The aftermath of a terror-filled past and the separation from their matrilineal support arise in *for colored girls* as the crisis of estrangement, which was mirrored in the opening moments. Remedying the crisis of estrangement is a monumental undertaking for a woman playwright who wanted to present black women’s emotional lives within a

prevailing black political and cultural milieu—known broadly as the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement, respectively—that shared Dunham’s assumption that one story could tell the story of them all. That one story, however, was in this instance a decidedly masculine one. We might revisit the visual and textual artifacts of the era and see the grim visages and theoretical musings of the movement’s proponents, among them Stokely Carmichael, Amiri Baraka, Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, and Addison Gayle. Their ubiquity in visual media, access to print and publication, and outright devaluation of women’s contributions to art and politics associated black political power with straight black male aggression—not with the “feminine” introspection that Shange hoped to achieve. Within a framework that depended upon essentialist notions of blackness, “the people,” and black culture, emotion could be expressed only as impassioned rejections of whiteness or as proclamations of black masculine, heterosexual power—not as an informative aspect of one’s lived, *individual* experience.

Shange wrote about this very idea in untitled prefatory remarks to her 1981 collection of plays entitled *Three Pieces*. She writes:

there are some thoughts that black people just dont have/according to popular mythology/ so white people never “imagine” we are having them/ & black people “block” vocabularies we perceive to be white folks’ ideas. this will never do. for in addition to the obvious stress of racism n poverty/ afro-american culture/ in attempts to carry on/ to move forward/ has minimized its “emotional” vocabulary to the extent that admitting feelings of rage, defeat, frustration is virtually impossible outside a collective voice. so we can add self-inflicted repression to the cultural causes of our cultural disease of high blood pressure.
(xii)

Shange identifies emotion as a demarcation between “the collective” and “the individual.” Her comments call attention to the longstanding “understanding” that the “collective voice” was a racial and gendered one that did not and could not afford to

encourage or sustain a divergent, feminine, and matrilineal perspective. Autobiographies by black women activists such as Angela Davis' *Angela Davis: An Autobiography* (1974), Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (1992), and Assata Shakur's *Assata: An Autobiography* (1987) testify to this claim, and provide a critical genealogy for Shange's comments. Davis, Brown, and Shakur reflect upon the principles of the Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Army as well as their own involvement in these black nationalist organizations. By their account, the masculine narrative of the nationalist movements foreclosed anything that might sully the strong front needed for nationalist work, including anything that catered to the individual (read: feminine or emotional) or homosexual (read: feminine and white).²⁶ Although they upheld the commitment to black political enfranchisement espoused by these organizations, they objected to the notion that a black politically united front far outweighed (any real or imagined) gender needs. For these women—whose narration of their individual lives nonetheless told a collective story about black suffering at the hands of *de jure* and *de facto* racism, sexism, and homophobia—the pressure for an uncritical political union distilled into yet another iteration of patriarchy; only this time, it had a black face.

Shange and her activist sisters in arms shared a common tactic in their struggle: explicating, nuancing, and critiquing the black experience through the experiences of black women was not ill suited to the demands of the era. In fact, through the choreopoetic form, the colored girls respond to nationalist mandates, and in the process acquire a form of wholeness that was politically at odds with the greedy appetites of oppression and occupation. Foregrounding the choreopoem in this way, we can explain wholeness as both a political and deeply spiritual project. We can return to the opening

moments of *for colored girls* to think more about this. Shange communicates in those moments through crisis, reflecting the colored girls' "struggle to become all that is forbidden by [her] environment, all that is forfeited by [her] gender, all that [they] have forgotten" (xv). The condition of *being* a black girl is itself a dilemma, for they have been cut off from all of their resources, which have been forbidden, forfeited, and forgotten on account of their gender. In the opening moments, these colored girls are entrapped in the crisis of estrangement: they are but a shell of themselves—there but not *there*, feeling but not *feeling*.

As the land in which her characters can live, the choreopoetic form carries the allure and structuring power of a myth of origin. Her love and concern for black women and black women characters cast her in the role of a creator who first identifies a need, then fashions the void of sheer being into a form that serves her purpose and intent. Willing the choreopoem out of nothing is akin to the power of *àshe*, or spiritual affirmation or command.²⁷ The term "*àshe*" literally translates in Yoruba to "so be it," and "may it happen," and resonates with the affirmative implications of "Amen." At its most fundamental, *àshe* is the morally neutral power or life-force that is inherent in all creation. Its neutrality carries a fullness that is reminiscent of the void of sheer being. As Robert Farris Thompson writes in *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1983), *àshe* is a divine enabling light that is accessible to and may be "called down" by women and men "to kill and to give life, according to the purpose and nature of its bearer."²⁸ *Àshe* is, thus, a spiritual force that is subject to human directive and command. To channel and will this power-to-make-things-happen toward particular ends is to affirm the intrinsic animated quality of the universe, as well as the co-creative

power that humans share with the spiritual world to effect the physical world. Wielding the spiritual command of *àshe*, Shange not only affirms the spiritual foundation of her choreopoetic form, but also casts the choreopoem as a manifestation of that “power-to-make-things-happen” in which black women characters could live.

In the opening moments of *for colored girls*, the Lady in Brown similarly harnesses the power of *àshe*. Ensnared and frozen by the chaos of the harsh music and dim lights, the Lady in Brown wills herself to life. Despite her intuitive gesture to reach out to the Lady in Red, the Lady in Brown’s gesture of need is unintelligible, for even after she reaches out, all of the colored girls remain couched in their postures of distress. There is no serenity in the silence, stillness, or gathering of women; instead, there is the imprint of chaos, crisis and denial. Denied recognition and realizing the failed attempts of gesture and music to create community, she turns to voice. She *speaks*:

dark phrases of womanhood
of never havin been a girl
half-notes scattered
without rhythm/no tune
distraught laughter fallin
over a black girl’s shoulder
it’s funny/ it’s hysterical
the melody-less-ness of her dance
don’t tell nobody don’t tell a soul
she’s dancin on beer cans & shingles (3)

As if standing aloft and looking upon the gathering of colored girls, the Lady in Brown uses the voice to cut through the chaos of the opening moments. Scholars of black drama and theatre have read these opening lines in various ways. Kimberly Benston, for instance, argues that *for colored girls* “opens within a landscape of negation,”²⁹ while Tejumola Olaniyan asserts that the Lady in Brown’s opening words are “a catalogue of pains—‘half notes,’ ‘distraught laughter’—attending black womanhood.”³⁰ The

incongruence and catalogue of pain that Benston and Olaniyan identify are indeed implicated in the “distraught laughter” that falls “over a black girl’s shoulder,” and are even identifiable in “the melody-less-ness of [the black girl’s] dance.” I would add too that the Lady in Brown’s opening words punctuate and clarify the chaos that meets them on the stage. Moreover, the act of speaking not only affirms the colored girls’ experience in the opening moments, but also clarifies and in fact articulates the busyness of harsh music and lighting that bring them onto the stage.

In these few words, the Lady in Brown identifies and recites their chaos, their madness, and the decay—i.e., beer cans & shingles—that it has caused. She continues:

I can’t hear anythin
But maddening screams
& the soft strains of death (4)

Through her reference to maddening screams and the soft strains of death, the Lady in Brown reflects upon the quality of *àshe* as she and the other colored girls experience it in the opening moments. Whereas *àshe* is the inherent, morally neutral force or pulsation of all creation, the fact that it can be shaped and directed by humans suggests that humans similarly embody or hold this force or pulsation. Therefore, when humans channel *àshe*, this inherent power moves because it is being summoned or “called down” by an equal force. There is an understood equality between the human *àshe* and the larger universal *àshe*; indeed, they are one and the same.

Thus, in ideal situations, there is a flow of *àshe* between humans and creation that is steady and congruent. But the “maddening screams” and “soft strains of death” that Lady in Brown hears suggest an incongruence or imbalance in *àshe* that yields pain and even madness. So, while her spoken poetry clarifies the chaos around her (or as Olaniyan

suggested, catalogues the pain that the colored girls have experienced), she is also identifying an imbalance or constriction in *àshe*. This is most evident in the fact that, at this point in her recitation, the other colored girls are still frozen in their postures of distress. If *àshe* is truly a steady pulsation that flows easily from one object to another, then their frozenness is indicative of constriction or even amputation. With *àshe* constricted in this way, the colored girls are not working at their fullest capacity. On the one hand, they cannot enjoy their humanity—and specifically the human capacity to feel and consciously navigate their physical world; and, on the other hand, they cannot fully enjoy the intimate engagement with the spiritual world that steady *àshe* allows. Devoid of this aspect of their power, the colored girls become “desensitized to cosmic order; [and] consequently, dehumanized.”³¹

Thus, the Lady in Brown is expressing a concern about the erosion of the colored girls’ individual life-force, and, by extension, her ability to actively and fully contribute to her community’s health.³² I identified this erosion of individual life-force in the previous chapter as the tragedy of estrangement, and it is something that I return to and situate within the context of *for colored girls* in the upcoming pages. For now, however, I want to maintain sight of the Lady in Brown and the concerns that she raises about the colored girls’ estrangement. Out of her need to create a space where she and other colored girls can live, she implores the audience to intervene on their behalf. “Sing a black girl’s song,” she urges. Somebody, anybody:

bring her out
to know herself...
sing her song of life
she’s been dead so long
closed in silence so long
she doesn’t know the sound

of her own voice
her infinite beauty...
sing her sighs
sing the song of her possibilities
sing a righteous gospel
let her be born
let her be born
& handled warmly. (4)

So estranged are the colored girls from their true *àshe* or essence, that they do not even recognize “the sound of [their] own voice.” The colored girls’ individuality and personal distinctions have been rendered ghostly by the “metaphysical dilemma” of being black, women, and alive. Each colored girl does not know “her infinite beauty,” for she has been dead and “closed in silence so long.” Recognizing the desperation of their situation, she turns to one present, ready source of aid: the audience. The Lady in Brown’s charge to “sing a black girl’s song” does not tell the audience how or what to sing—only that song is necessary to “bring her out/ to know herself.” There is the underlying assumption that the audience already knows or can/will intuit how to sing the colored girls to their deliverance.

In these opening moments, the Lady in Brown establishes song—or what might be thought about as the meeting of voice, melody, and poetry—as the interactive mode through which a community is called into being. By using song as the metaphor for audience-player connection, the Lady in Brown, and by extension Shange, asserts how central and necessary community is to remedying the colored girls’ estrangement and, thus, to their reclamation of *àshe*. The demarcations between the audience and the players, and between the audience’s “real time” and the colored girls’ seeming primordial timelessness, must crumble under the weight and need of her plea.³³ Thus, through the

Lady in Brown's allusion to song, she interpolates and transforms a gathering of people from an audience to a *community*.³⁴

This moment of transformation, activated through the power of the spoken word, or *nommo*, occurs within the final words, when the Lady in Brown's tone changes from imploring to imperative. Harnessing and redirecting the *àshe* of the harsh music, dim lights, and the audience, she calls a community into being. Her command to "sing" the black girl's sighs and possibilities, and to "let" her be born and handled warmly become synonymous with "so be it," "may it happen," "amen." *Àshe*. She *unlocks* the constricted *àshe*, and in the manner of those things and persons under such a powerful spiritual command, the colored girls open up:

Lady in Brown:
i'm outside chicago

Lady in Yellow:
i'm outside detroit

Lady in Purple:
i'm outside houston

Lady in Red:
i'm outside baltimore

Lady in Green:
i'm outside san francisco

Lady in Blue:
i'm outside manhattan

Lady in Orange:
i'm outside st. louis

Lady in Brown:
this is for colored girls who have considered suicide
but moved to the ends of their own rainbows. (5-6)

Despite the Lady in Brown's powerful invocation of *àshe*, the colored girls remain on the *outside*—of history, of intelligibility, of society. They are not only estranged from their essence, but from the narratives, language, and societal structures that can validate their experiences.

Fortunately, unintelligibility does not preclude inclusion. Rather, within this marginal, otherworldly space, unintelligibility becomes the basis for community among seven unnamed women who speak from geographically and temporally indeterminable places. This discursive diversity, or heteroglossia, reflects the chaos of the opening moments and the colored girls' foray into the ancestral burial grounds, where their past pains await healing. The heteroglossia also discloses how the choreopoetic form (or ritual *as* performance) alters their experience of time and place. As I will show throughout the remainder of this chapter, the clamor of multiple indeterminable discursive locations is the precondition for "an act of self reconstitution"³⁵ that not only unlocks (which the Lady in Brown has done already) but fully reunites the colored girls with their *àshe*. In the moment of reunion, fashioned as the "spell" or quiet moment preceding the emotional ecstasy that ends the production, that which has been forgotten, forbidden, and forfeited on account of gender is recuperated back into the realm of memory. Heteroglossia will give way to glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, a sacred female communion with their matrilineage, illustrating how *for colored girls* operates as both political redress and spiritual renewal.

Whereas combat breathing is the guiding political, aesthetic principle of Shange's choreopoetic form, *àshe* is the guiding spiritual principle. Moreover, the communion, reunion, and recuperation of *àshe* that the choreopoem allows suggests that the spiritual

and the socio-political not only exist simultaneously, but as a reflection and reconstitution of the other. Black playwrights and theatre theorists Paul Carter Harrison, Barbara Ann Teer, Carlton and Barbara J. Molette, and Ron Milner similarly espoused a theatrical aesthetic that brought the spiritual and the socio-political into contact with one another. This aesthetic, they suggested, would be enlivened by rhythms such as those created by the black preacher, and the religious ritual of the black church more broadly.³⁶ Thus they sought to create theatrical conditions that would activate the force that would both unlock and revitalize their energies, with the hope that “those [daily] experiences that [defied] rational explanation [would] become sensible” (xvii).

Shange shared with these practitioners the need to create a theatrical experience that was both spiritually edifying and politically explanatory. Yet in recent critical treatment of *for colored girls*, the spiritual and political impulses seem to be irreconcilable, for one (the political) tends to be favored at the expense of the other (the spiritual). Kimberly Benston and Tejumola Olaniyan read the individual-collective dialectic in *for colored girls* primarily as an engagement with the gender-racial questions of the 1970s, while Philip Effiong courses into the spiritual implications of the work, but without explicitly connecting it to the political impulse that he also identifies. These works evince a general proclivity for reading the demands of politics and history in opposition to rather than in dialogue with the ritual impulses in Shange’s work. As was the case with Cummings’ and Levinson’s readings of Josephine Baker’s work during the Roaring Twenties, this proclivity is likely due to social priming as well as the political imperatives that guides one’s work. Dramatic critic Sandra Richards demonstrates such an ambivalence.

Finding God, Loving Fiercely

From the outset, Richards identifies one of the most outstanding features of Shange's dramaturgy as "the dialectic between the felt constrictions of the social order and the perceived limitlessness of the natural order" (73). Richards further expounds her claim: "On the one hand, there is an awareness of social oppression and commitment to struggle; on the other, there is a desire to transcend or bypass, through music and dance, the limitations of social and human existence." The political, historical, and social realms of oppression reside on one end of this dialectic, while spiritual or natural transcendence of this oppression resides on the other. More specifically, for Richards, this dialectic is represented on one end as Shange's use of Fanon's concept of combat breath, and on the other as an impulse that she describes as a "will to divinity."

Although Richards readily admits that combat breathing is "noteworthy because of its potential reference to poetic or spiritual realms," she nonetheless chooses to "use the term in the more restrictive sense of an awareness of social determinants and commitment to change" (73). She is clearly more interested in unpacking a "will to divinity." Heavily indebted to an African worldview, the will to divinity reflects the desire among the colored girls to transcend or even bypass, through the musical, poetic, and dance vocabularies of the choreopoetic form, the social and political situations that characterize their lived experiences. Richards elaborates:

The diametric opposite of Shange's combat breath is the will to divinity, whereby individual protagonists seek to transcend corporeal existence in order to merge with natural, cosmic forces. [In *for colored girls*, the women] completely forsake the troubled realm of social relations to gain entry into the more pleasurable world of private, spiritual communication" (74).

The “private, spiritual communication” that Richards identifies is clearly estranged from the “troubled realm of social relations” that the colored girls experience. Although the colored girls are “African people raised within the Western perspective,” she posits that:

“[they] tend to feel that they must opt for one mode of knowledge over the other. Their Western heritage teaches them to see experience as fragmented rather than holistic and to value rational over emotional systems—hence, the dialectic of combat breath vs. will to divinity.”

By Richards’ account, the tensions and cleavages between the spiritual and the socio-political are an unfortunate, albeit inevitable, result of being an “African” woman raised in the West. Western cultural values have assaulted the colored girls’ natural inclination to the point that they can no longer view the spiritual alongside the mundane, or the sacred as mutually informing and being informed by the profane. Devoid of their holistic approach, they must opt for “one mode of knowledge”—or for either the socio-political struggle of combat breathing or the spiritual transcendence in the will to divinity—over another. Following Richards’ logic and reading, there is no place for these two impulses to exist holistically and comprehensively.

Richards was ambivalent about connecting the spiritual and the political in her reading of *for colored girl*; however, my reading reveals that these impulses meld together in the final moments of the production. While the opening moments of *for colored girls* dramatize the choreopoem’s *raison d’etre*, “a laying on of hands,” the final piece, best dramatizes the promised land, or the living that the choreopoem allows. Like the introductory poem “dark phrases,” “a laying on of hands” also includes a choral moment in which all of the colored girls take part. The landscape of negation and catalogue of pain that characterizes “dark phrases” is in the final poem replaced by a clarity of perspective foreshadowed by the Lady in Green’s use of combat breathing in a previous

poem. This clarity inspires the colored girls and peaks in a “song of joy” that is reminiscent of the spiritual practice of shouting, which Zora Neale Hurston discusses in her ethnographic study *The Sanctified Church*, and speaking in tongues, theorized as a literary concept by critic Mae G. Henderson, in black holiness traditions.

The potency of “a laying on of hands” derives from and is best understood within the context of the preceding poem, “a nite with beau willie brown.” This poem caps off the catalogue of pains that Olaniyan identifies in the opening poem. Spoken by the Lady in Red, “a nite with beau willie brown” tells the story of a troubled relationship between a young black couple, Crystal and Beau Willie. The audience is introduced to Beau Willie in the opening lines of the poem:

there waz no air/ the sheets made ripples under his
body like crumpled paper napkins in a summer park/ & lil
specks of somethin from tween his toes or the biscuits
from the day before ran in the sweat that tucked the sheet
into his limbs like he waz an ol frozen bundle of chicken

Right away, the audience is thrown into Beau Willie’s stifling situation. There is an immediate sense of stagnancy and claustrophobia. With no air, Beau Willie is surrounded by a sense of strangulation and lifelessness. Likened to “crumpled paper napkins” and “specks of somethin from tween his toes,” he becomes indistinguishable from trash, decay, or the biscuit left over from the day before. Unwanted, lifeless, and thrown away, Beau Willie becomes the embodiment of the Lady in Red’s opening line: *there waz no air*.

The stagnancy that attends these opening lines is reminiscent of the constricted *àshe* that attended “dark phrases,” the opening poem. Here, under the Lady in Red’s narration, Beau Willie not only embodies stagnancy, but the very quality of constriction

or amputation itself. Although he went about the business of making coffee, drinking wine and water, Beau

wished one of his friends who knew where he waz wd come by
with some blow or some shit/anythin/there waz no air (55)

As in the opening moments of *for colored girls*, Beau is cut off from community. Despite his wishes that someone would *see* and come to him, he remains alone, pining for “blow or some shit/anythin” (55) that would ease the pain of his estrangement from his family and his friends. The source of Beau Willie’s pain, the audience soon discovers, is two-fold: first, he has only recently returned from Vietnam. He told Crystal again and again that “there waznt nothin wrong with him” (55). In fact, he reasoned,

any niggah wanna kill vietnamese children more n stay home
& raise his own is sicker than a rabid dog (55)

Since he had not preferred to kill innocent children, Beau Willie reasoned—in fact, insisted—that there was, indeed, nothing wrong with him. Separated from his friends, and dodging accusations from his girl friend, Beau Willie left a war in one part of the world to engage in a battle of loneliness and suspicion in his own back yard.

Try though he did to defend himself, the Lady in Red tells the audience the truth: “he came home crazy as hell” (55). Offering a litany of Beau’s pains, the audience learns that Beau had tried to obtain veterans benefits, but had been denied. He tried to go to school, but was always routed to the remedial classes (since, in reality, “he cdnt read wortha damn” 56). He started driving a gypsy cab, but was continually harassed by the police. Having served as a soldier who fought in and lived through the Vietnam War, Beau has returned home only to be treated as a second class citizen. And, then, we learn the second reason for Beau’s pain: Crystal

went & got pregnant again/ beau most beat
her to death when she tol him/ she still gotta scar
under her right tit where he cut her up/still crystal
went right on & had the baby/ so now beau willie had
two children/ a little girl/ naomi kenya & a boy/ kwame beau
willie brown/ & there waz no air/

Denied the access and mobility enabled by money, education, and patriotism, Beau not only realizes his own precarious situation, but the added humiliation that he, a war veteran, is in no position to support another child. According to the *Lady in Red*, Beau did not handle the situation gracefully, for Crystal still bears the scar of his loneliness and brokenness, which eerily mirror the production's first choral moment. Beau is similarly "outside" societal structures, and remains unintelligible within this societal matrices of power, and within the intimate space of his family and community as well.

The *Lady in Red*'s narration up until this point lays out the life circumstances and troubled nature of Crystal and Beau Willie's relationship—"how their thing had been goin since he got back" (55). Reflecting upon his situation in the stagnant, claustrophobic, and sweltering room, Beau tries to understand "how in the hell [he got] in this mess anyway" (56). Somebody, the audience discovers, had told Crystal that he was spending his money on the "bartendin bitch down at the merry-go-round cafe" (56). Reaching the end of her patience, Crystal took out a court order against Beau, forbidding him to see Naomi and Kwame, which resulted in yet another round of physical abuse. The *Lady in Red* said that "crystal most died/ that's why the police wdnt low beau near where she lived" (56). To Beau, however, all of this hinged around the fact that Crystal wouldn't marry him. She

had been in his ass to marry her
since she waz 14 years old & here when she 22/ she wanna
throw him out cuz he say he'll marry her/ she burst

out laughin/ hollering whatchu wanna marry me for now/
so I can support yr
ass/or come sit wit ya when they lock yr behind
up/cause they gonna come for ya/ ya goddamn lunatic/
they gonna come/ & I'm not gonna have a thing to do
wit it/o no I wdnt marry yr pitiful black ass for
nothin & she went on to bed (56)

It was within these troubled dynamics that Crystal and Beau Willie dealt with one another. Young, desperate, and frustrated, both young people experienced a sense of abandonment: Crystal because her children's father could not be a provider or her protector, and Beau because his children's mother refused his marriage proposals and didn't seem to understand how hard things were for him now. Critical readings generally interpret Crystal and Beau's relationship as Shange's most blatant attack against racism in the larger society and patriarchy within the intimate spaces of the home. But the ability to experience someone else's story—represented here in the *Lady in Red's* ability to *get at* and share this man's story—suggests a deeper emotional mechanism at play.

Whereas the majority of the other poems in *for colored girls* are rendered from a first-person black female perspective (with a notable exception being the poem "sechita" offered from a third-person perspective), "a nite with beau willie brown" is the only one where the narrator tells a black man's story or where he is discussed with such careful attention to his own dilemmas of being black, male, and alive in the United States. Unlike the slippery slope of compassion that Katherine Dunham encountered in her portrayal of the lynched victim in her 1951 *Southland*, Shange seems to want the *Lady in Red's* story to be the story of them all. Shange also does what the leading male figures of the Black Power Movement refused to do: she humanizes and particularizes the stories of black women *and* black men. The emotional catharsis generated here is not simply to educate

white people of the wages of hate. Rather, in bringing Beau's suffering near through the Lady in Red's narration—and, notably, without the aid of a white female proxy—Shange is inviting the audience to similarly (and vicariously) grieve and come to terms with their own similar experiences. This invitation is deepened in part by the work that the Lady in Brown did in the beginning of the production: by transforming a gathering of people into a community of listeners, witnesses, and supporters, she invoked the sacred space of ritual that is needed for individual and community healing and transformation.

But the sanctity of this ritual space is threatened, or at least called into question, in the concluding moments of “a nite with beau willie brown.” After thinking “bout how he waz gonna get crystal to take him back/ & let him be a man in the house” (57)—which was an all too important issue since he apparently could not be a man or be treated as a man out in the world—Beau Willie went to Crystal to clear up the whole mess. Beau, who “oozed kindness,” convinced Crystal, “who had known so lil,” to let him see and hold his kids (59). The narrator says:

as soon as crystal let the baby outta her arms/ beau
jumped up a laughin & a gigglin/ a hootin & a hollerin/
awright bitch/ awright bitch/ you gonna marry me/
you gonna marry me...
i aint gonna marry ya/ I aint ever gonna marry ya/
for nothin/ you gonna be in the jail/ you gonna be
under the jail for this/ now gimme my kids/ ya give
me back my kids/

A hysterical Beau kicks the screen out of the window and held the kids there. Seeing the danger her children are in, Crystal says, “yeh, I'll marry ya/ anything/ but bring the children back in the house” (59). Five stories below, people on the street screamed up at Beau. And then, as if he were in that stagnant, claustrophobic room again, he began to

sweat. Beau's demand: "say to alla the neighbors/ you gonna marry me." Crystal's response:

i stood by beau in the window/ with naomi reachin
for me/ & kwame screamin mommy mommy from the fifth
story/ but I cd only whisper/ & he dropped em (60)

The audience is thrust once again into crisis: the *crisis* of a mother who could not protect herself or her children; the *crisis* of insanity born of a man's experience in a racist and patriarchal and imperialist society; the *crisis* of a young colored girl who dared to love and *give* to a young colored boy; the *crisis* of a young colored boy who, coming of age as a pawn and fodder for a country that refused to *see* him, could not bare the responsibility and obligation of hope or love; the *crisis* of children who are caught in the crossfire.

But what reads as a crisis and as a breach against the sanctity of the ritual space these colored girls have created also gives way to transformation. This transformation is seen most vividly in two places: first, in the final three lines of the poem; and second, in the "spell" that transitions "a nite with beau willie brown" into the final poem "a laying on of hands." In the first instance, the Lady in Red narrates Crystal and Beau Willie's story, although there is a moment when her reference to "Crystal" as a distant character is suddenly replaced with "i". In response to Beau Willie's demand to marry him, Crystal ceases to exist as a character, and, instead, is embodied by the Lady in Red. No longer the narrator of Crystal's story, the Lady in Red's shift to the first person signals a full embrace or ownership of Crystal's story. Perhaps it is simply a byproduct of the ritual process, wherein the individual is subsumed by the community, and vice versa. Perhaps it is a practice in and illustrative of the vicariousness of compassion.

Or, perhaps, as I believe, the Lady in Red was Crystal all along. Like the Lady in Green before her, the Lady in Red *à la* Crystal experiences her estrangement as loss of self, and as a loss of children (read as that which demarcates mother as self). But debilitated by an immensity of pain and loss that was just *too much* to reclaim, the Lady in Red, unlike the Lady in Green, was unable to recount this story in the first person. The inability to testify again topples the Lady in Red into silence. This perhaps explains why we meet the Lady in Red in the opening moments as a rush of color who is then ensnared in a posture of distress. The story that she shares, and that she herself experienced with Beau Willie, is a reminder not only of what she has lost, but of how she, through her biological reproductive faculties as a woman, literally becomes the one story that tells the story of every one of them. Her posture of distress in the opening moments not only reflects her loss, but—without the intervention of ritual, a place to *live*—her fate to reproduce loss, and her seeming inability to change that cycle. Thus crisis—broken, occupied by this terrible story and estranged from her greatest power—had become her ontological condition.

But as this dissertation has examined and has illustrated, *ritual presupposes crisis*. Moreover, through the expressive, ritual form of the choreopoem, the Lady in Red, as well as the other colored girls, have a chance to make similar transformations, and even *live*. The final leg of this transformative journey begins in the transitional space between “a night with beau willie brown” and “a laying on of hands.” Unlike the majority of the preceding poems, the change from one to the other is not marked by stage notes. Rather the transition is marked as a blank, white space on the page:

This white space is reminiscent of Suzan-Lori Parks definition of “spell,” as an unspoken moment or interaction between characters. Although Parks identifies this spell as “a place where the figures experience their pure true simple state,” no action or stage business is necessary (16). She continues: “the feeling: look at a daguerreotype; or: the planets are aligning and as they move we hear the music of their spheres. A spell is a place of great (unspoken) emotion. It’s also a place for an emotional transition” (16-17).

Thus, Shange’s deployment of the spell urges the audience to both acknowledge and connect to feeling. The colored girls’ collective foray into the ancestral burial grounds blends their voices with the moans and wailing that arise from the deep. This heteroglossia however is different from the one that emerged in Sechita’s story. Whereas Sechita’s dancing called forth other women who had had similar experiences, Sechita remained cold and immobile. Her dancing may have carved out a singular space amid the onslaught of all the voices, but she nonetheless maintained the symptoms of estrangement, functioning even at the end of her story as a woman approaching her own grave. Sechita did not experience the unfolding of hope and redemption, for the severity of her pain demanded an estrangement that she was either unwilling or unable to mend. Instead her improvisation functioned more like a requiem to herself, dancing to the sweet, “soft strains of death” (4).

However, the circumstances are different by the end of the production. Whereas Sechita unwittingly consorted with the women in the ancestral burial grounds (that is, by nature of performance rather than as her intent), Crystal had a strong community of

support from the other colored girls. Her testimony rested wearily on the previous testimonies, taking on their strength, authenticity, and most important, the willingness to be soft. Tender. Open. Crystal rejected Sechita's emotional rigidity and immobility, and opted instead for a vulnerability that plunged her right into the deep and also signaled her desire to be made whole. It was at this point, when Crystal and the other colored girls consorted with those down there, that the hope, strength, and comfort that evaded Sechita found them. Together in the quiet of the spell, they reconnected with their matrilineage in a sacred "act of self-reconstitution."³⁷ And under quickened *àshe*, heteroglossia had to yield to glossolalia: a speaking in tongues, a holiness released (62), a sacred female communion with all of those other mothers. Emptied of her trauma, cleansed by her tears, Crystal and the colored girls overcame by the power of their testimony.³⁸

The self-reconstitution that occurs in the spell is relevant to the objective of this chapter for two particular reasons: one, because the collaborative spirit the colored girls exhibit reflects the ritual underpinnings of the choreopoem; and two, more important, because the spell—temporally and geographically nowhere—represents that place where the colored girls can *live*. Whereas the spell allows for emotional transition, it also reveals the chaos of the opening moments as the fodder for communal redemption. This chaos was the necessary precondition, the *crisis*, for which ritual was enacted. The "decrudging" and quickening of *àshe*—qualities of the ritual identified by Barbara Ann Teer—were achieved in this spell.³⁹ But as rituals do, they plunge directly into the *chthonic realm*, that is, into the world down there where Beloved yet consorts with the unnamed in the belly of the deep. Time and space give way to the spell of ritual and the communion of

glossolalia, and the colored girls arrive in that moment prior to discourse, adorned with the latency of the African sculpture.⁴⁰ They are singular iterations of an indefinite transformation and at the same time a vastness poured into flesh and bone.

They are *àshe*.

Crystal and the other colored girls dwell in this emotionally rich moment. When they emerge from the spell, language must itself curve around an experience that happened outside time and space. Glossolalia gives way again to heteroglossia, a final choral moment, as the colored girls carve their transformation into words:

lady in red:
i waz missin somethin

lady in purple:
somethin so important

lady in orange:
somethin promised

lady in blue:
a layin on of hands

lady in green:
fingers near my forehead

lady in yellow:
strong

lady in green:
cool

lady in orange:
movin

lady in purple:
makin me whole

lady in orange:
sense

lady in green:
pure

lady in blue:
all the gods comin into me
layin me open to myself (60-61)

Whereas there was no serenity in the silence and stillness of the opening moments, there is here the suggestion of a serenity recaptured and reclaimed. The imprint of chaos, crisis and denial that characterized the first poem, “dark phrases,” is now replaced with a missing something, a *promised* something that is “strong,” “movin,” “cool,” “makin me whole.” It is through the ritual process of the choreopoem, the deep descent into the spell, and the vastness of the ancestral burial grounds that this missing something, *àshe*, is reclaimed, unbound and redirected. In a sense, what follows the spell is but a tautology, a rephrasing of the in-spell transformation. It leads the colored girls back to their power, for as the Lady in Red announces:

i found god in myself
& i loved her/ i loved her fiercely

“& this,” the Lady in Brown tells us in closing:

is for colored girls who have considered
suicide/ but *are movin* to the ends of their own
Rainbows

Chapter 3 (Shange) Notes

¹ Ntozake Shange, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is enuf*, 3. Subsequent page references to *for colored girls* will be made in the text.

² Philip Ku Effiong asserts in *In Search of a Model for African-American Drama: A Study of Selected Plays by Lorraine Hansberry, Amiri Baraka, and Ntozake Shange* that the vibrant integration of poetry, heritage, and drama in Shange's choreopoem was built upon a "form first advanced by Glenda Dickerson" (125). Effiong continues: "Drawing on her developed sense of dance and movement, and her intense training in choral and oral interpretation, Dickerson began to experiment with and perfect the choreopoem style before the term was coined for Shange's *Colored Girls*" (125). I raise this point to show how the verbal and nonverbal forms that Shange valued were similarly valued by other black women playwrights and directors of the era, pointing to the necessity for and means by which they created and perfected dramatic forms that could tell the stories they wanted to tell. Bending the conventions of theatrical form through her explicit integration of nonverbal forms was one of the reasons Shange insisted on calling herself "a poet or writer/rather than a playwright" for her sole interest, achieved as it were through these forms, was to uncover "the poetry of the moment" as well as "the emotional & aesthetic impact of a character or a line" (Shange, "Uncovered Losses," ix). Throughout this chapter, I refer to Shange as "poet," "writer," "dramatist," or "playwright," using these titles interchangeably to allude to and encompass the interests she expresses here.

³ Nigerian playwrights and dramatic critics Wole Soyinka and Femi Euba in two separate projects discuss the ritual implications of African and diasporic drama. In *Myth, Literature, and the African World*, Soyinka explains how the crisis or conflicts that drive the dramatic event mirror and resonate with the need for ritual as a remedy for that conflict. On the other hand, in *Poetics of the Creative Process: An Organic Practicum to Playwriting*, Euba, relies on the cultural particularity of Yoruba drama and ritual to propose a universal concept of creativity and the creative process. In his book *Archetypes, Imprecators, and Victims of Fate: Origins and Developments of Satire in Black Drama*, however, Euba uses the attributes and ritual of the deity Esu-Elegba to offer a definitive concept of black theatre. The conceptions of ritual that both Soyinka and Euba explicate provide the metaphorical and structural power for the ideas that I explore in this chapter.

⁴ Playwright Glenda Dickerson writes extensively about the theatre of the Black Freedom years. See chapter 6 entitled "Sitting Down, Sitting In and Standing Up" in *African American Theater: A Cultural Companion*.

⁵ Wallace, Michele, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, 11.

⁶ Black Studies first institutionalized as a department at San Francisco State University in 1968; Chicana/o Studies at California State University Los Angeles in 1968; Asian American Studies at University of California, Santa Barbara in 1968; and Women's Studies at San Diego State University and the State University of New York in 1970.

⁷ See Amiri Baraka, "The Revolutionary Theatre," *Home: Social Essays* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1966): 210-215.

⁸ Tate, *Black Women Writers at Work*, 153.

⁹ Black literary scholar Akasha Gloria Hull writes about the staunch conservatism of the 1980s as a particularly and peculiarly latent time for black women's creativity. See Akasha (Gloria) T. Hull, *Soul Talk: The New Spirituality of African American Women*.

¹⁰ Lester, *A Critical Study of the Plays*, 3.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, 35-36.

¹⁴ Lester, *A Critical Study of the Plays*, 4. The preceding in text quotation is also found on this page.

¹⁵ This block quotation and the preceding in text quotation are found in Lester, *A Critical Study of the Plays*, 269.

¹⁶ Lorde, "Uses of the Erotic," 54.

¹⁷ Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest/Mask of Resistance*, 120-128.

¹⁸ Quoted in Shange, "unrecovered losses," xii.

¹⁹ For more on Shange's combat aesthetic, see Tejumola Olaniyan's *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance: The Invention of Cultural Identities in African, African-American, and Caribbean Drama*, 121.

²⁰ Shange, "unrecovered losses," xiii.

²¹ Ibid.

²² For more on the erotic, see Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic."

²³ My use of *womanist* here is based upon Alice Walker's now legendary definition of womanism offered in the opening pages of her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Walker forwarded her definition in 1983, eight years after Shange's *for colored girls* hit the Broadway stage. However, by alluding to the "womanist sentiments" in Shange's work, I hope to show how the particularity of black womanhood and experience was a focus among novelists, essayists, and dramatists that emerged long before Walker named it. I do this also to reflect the collaborative, collective spirit of the choreopoem, showing how womanism (as it would be named) grew out of the discursive diversity and conventions of literature, theatre, and dance as used by various black women art makers.

²⁴ Lester, *A Critical Study of the Plays*, 13; the preceding in text quotation may also be found on this page.

²⁵ In an interview, writer Gloria Naylor stated: "what [the women healers in my novels] share is...a spiritual strength and a sense of female communion that I believe all women have employed historically for their psychic health and survival" (526). Furthermore, female communion might be further explained as "the company of women...[that has evolved] by necessity and [triumphed] through courage and love" (526). See Kathleen Puhr's "Healers in Gloria Naylor's Fiction."

²⁶ We might extend this line of reasoning to nationalist critiques of homosexuality—seen as both "feminine" and "white"—demonstrated, for instance, in Eldridge Cleaver's discursive attack on writer James Baldwin. See Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*.

²⁷ Shange's quote resonates with the conviction of need that one finds in James Weldon Johnson's discussion of the biblical creation story as conveyed in the folk sermons of the "old-time Negro preacher" (2). Shange's need to create a world for her characters mirrors and lies within a tradition in which black religious leaders have brought the biblical references to bear on the lived experiences of black people in the United States. I read Weldon's sermons, and Shange's interview with Davis, as the foundations of a theory on the evolution of black American subjectivity. See James Weldon Johnson's *God's Trombones: Seven Negro Sermons in Verse*.

²⁸ Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, 6. Traditional healer-scholar Malidoma Somé similarly writes about the inherent power of all creation, with special attention to power that emanates from nature. He writes, “every tree, plant, hill, mountain, rock, and each thing that was here before us emanates or vibrates with subtle energy that has healing power whether we know it or not” (*Healing Wisdom of Africa* 38). Somé, therefore, recognizes the healing potential of the subtle, inherent energies of nature. Dramatic scholar Sandra Richards brings the notion of *àshe* to bear on the theatrical scenes. She writes that an African worldview “posits the universe as animated by the interplay of energy fields or forces, (such that) power resides not only in men and machines, but also in props, costumes, lighting, and sets. All have the capacity to assert a presence akin to what we associate with actors/characters” (76). Richards further extends her discussion to language, music, and dance.

²⁹ Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism*, 92.

³⁰ Olaniyan, *Scars of Conquest/Masks of Resistance*, 130.

³¹ Harrison, *The Drama of Nommo: Black theater in the African Continuum*, xxi.

³² In *Our Mothers, Our Powers, Our Texts: Manifestations of Ajé in Africana Literature*, Teresa Washington offers a comprehensive study of African and African diasporic women, called “àjé,” who ritually wield power in order to achieve particular results. These women have variously been described as witches, healers, or spirit workers depending, in part, upon the position and intent of those who do the describing. Washington also defines the term “àjé” as the power itself, or what I am calling *àshe* in this chapter. She then follows this study with an examination of the ways in which “àjé” as power and as the harnesser of power become a significant trope that has spiritual, political, and cultural implications in African diasporic literature. In an examination that focuses on the dramatic texts of playwright August Wilson, dramatic critic Harry J. Elam, Jr. likens the power of *àshe* to the female character Aunt Esther in Wilson’s play *Gem of the Ocean*. See Elam’s *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, 184-191.

³³ Here, I am inspired by the concern that Paul Carter Harrison, a scholar of black theatre, expresses about a black person’s individual power. For Harrison, the erosion of an individual’s life-force “through some unnatural source of power” (xxi) is “the greatest villainy that can be committed” against an individual. This villainy is “worse than murder,” for it “disrupts the social harmony of the community,” and renders the individual incapable of contributing to the collective and to the stability of the collective. For more, see Harrison’s *The Drama of Nommo*.

³⁴ The assumptions implicit in the Lady in Brown’s supplication connect the audience to the colored girls, thus destroying the supposed “fourth wall” that characterizes Western theatre. The ritual underpinning of the choreopoem creates a space in which the audience is brought into communion with the players, thus calling a community into being. Traditional healer-scholar Malidoma Somé writes extensively about the importance of community to the practice of ritual. He identifies “community” as “the common handling of the journey.” For more see Somé’s *Healing Wisdom of Africa*, 78.

³⁵ Henderson, “Speaking in Tongues,” 360.

³⁶ In *The Drama of Nommo: Black theater in the African Continuum*, playwright-theatre critic Paul Carter Harrison identifies *nommo*, the power of the word, as the defining quality of black theater. *Nommo*, like *àshe*, is an *activating* force that “manipulates forms of raw life and conjures images that not only represent his biological place in Time and Space, but his spiritual existence as well” (xiv). Here Harrison connects the socio-political with the spiritual, and advocates for an aesthetic that equally considers both aspects. He identifies the black preacher and the religious ritual of the black church generally as the primary inspiration for this aesthetic, as did Barbara Ann Teer and playwrights and critics Carlton and Barbara Molette. This aesthetic relied on the premise that black people, “having suspended the disbelief of oppression all day” and relied on the Spirit for their aid, were “already sensitized” (Harrison xvii) to the spiritual forces these practitioners wanted to engage through their theatrical practice. This stands in contrast to Amiri Baraka’s notion that black theatre of the era should be pedagogical in its leaning, teaching black people how they were terrorized by white racial oppression. My use of *àshe* shares with Harrison’s use of *nommo* the idea that these constructs can operate on the spiritual plane, while also informing one’s lived experience, and, more importantly, how that experience is depicted and embodied through the theatrical event.

³⁷ Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues," 360.

³⁸ Inspired by Revelation 12:11, *American King James Version*.

³⁹ See Thomas' *Barbara Ann Teer and the National Black Theatre: Transformational Forces in Harlem*.

⁴⁰ Robert Farris Thompson discusses this notion at length in his scholarship on African Art how the stillness of African sculpture yet exudes and anticipates movement. For more, see *African Art in Motion*.

CHAPTER 4

Julie Dash and the Return to the Ancestral Burial Grounds

We're the daughters of those old dusty things Nana carries in her tin can.
—Eula, from *Daughters of the Dust*

*Y'all see how dey throw dem in de ground wit no care at all. Now dey come back to we!
Come back to get de proper way from we.*
—Miz Emma Julia, from *Daughters of the Dust: A Novel*

We [as people of African descent] must accept the task of "reinventing" our own images.
—Author Paule Marshall

The collision of colors in the final moments of Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls*—vivid in hue and sharpened by the blur of movement and high praise—mark their arrival in that tender place of communion with their mothers and other mothers. Their shared “metaphysical dilemma” of being black, women, and alive now bows humbly before the knowledge and re-discovery of their divinity. Past pains lose their sting as the colored girls reclaim their *àshe*, holiness, and individuality. Fortified with these qualities, these young women, adorned in the colors of the rainbow, find the god in themselves and they love her fiercely.

Shange dramatizes a ritual that calls a distinct community into being and at the same time differentiates that community into its component, individual parts. As the colored girls recite and dance their poems, they carve out spaces for themselves, breaking free from the homogenizing power of abuse and neglect. Upholding Shange's

dramatization of self and community healing, though, is the excavation and recognition of a sustaining and sanctifying matrilineage. Unearthing “the mislaid, forgotten, &/or misunderstood women writers, painters, mothers, cowgirls, & union leaders of [their] pasts” proved to be central to their healing and to the design of the show, as they interwove their own stories with their mothers’ stories.¹ Engulfed in the rhythms of possession, and divining a story where it never was, Shange’s colored girls achieve the highest form of love, which they held within themselves all along. Shange, thus, equates historical recovery with spiritual affirmation.

Some fifteen years later, a young filmmaker aspires toward the same level of engagement with the past through the lens of diasporic spirituality. Julie Dash’s 1991 film *Daughters of the Dust*, followed six years later by a novel of the same name that continues the story, landed on the cinematic circuit already equipped with the matrilineage that Shange’s colored girls excavated years before on stage. The film documents the last day before members of the Peazant family leave their homes on Dawtuh Island for better job and educational opportunities on the mainland. The story is set in 1902 and is narrated by both Nana, the matriarchal figure and spiritual elder of the Peazant family, and Eli and Eula Peazant's “unborn child,” who was sent by the ol’ souls to remind the family to maintain their connections with each other and with the world of the ancestors. The film captures the departure festivities, and reveals the excitement and ambivalence of leaving Nana’s spiritual protection and the African past that it represents, and embracing the possibility of fortune and new beginnings that the migration to the mainland seemingly promises. The story is captured in Gullah dialect and through an arresting visual narrative that has power “to heal our imperialized eyes” (xii).²

The novel iteration of *Daughters* picks up some ten years later. The Unborn Child, named Elizabeth and affectionally called Lil Bet, is now ten years old, and has a special affinity for the elderly in her community, especially Miz Emma Julia. The story quickly brings us to 1926, when Elizabeth, now twenty-four years old, returns to the island to teach in the local school after having worked for some time on the mainland. Although she loves her family, community, and island traditions, she struggles inwardly to honor Nana's old ways while being a part of the contemporary world that the mainland represents. Her self-exploration coincides with her cousin Amelia's return to the island. Amelia lives in New York with her mother and grandmother, who were among those who migrated to the mainland and then northward at the turn of the century. Amelia only visited the island once as a child, and is in for a rough ride as she now settles on the island as a young researcher whose success as a scholar depends on her ability to capture the story of those people on Dawtuh Island who weren't "much different from slavery times."³ Although she encounters some ambivalence from her extended family and the larger community, she completes her work, while learning more about herself, her family and the ancestral past along the way.

Although men feature prominently in both the film and novel versions of *Daughters of the Dust*, the story is at the heart about black women "at pivotal moments in their lives; enigmatic women who are juggling complex psyches."⁴ The chaos and questions that come as they transition from one life situation to another are always grounded by the steadfastness of their female community—a community that presupposes their kinship to the spiritual world. By dramatizing and capturing these moments between women, Dash, creating her work at the end of the twentieth century, bears witness to the continued need

for an aesthetic that is not only historically recuperative and spiritually affirming, as was Shange's before her, but that also allows the Spirit *and* experiences of women to assume hegemony, to be the source and guiding factor of dramatic exploration. It is, in fact, through the interactions between the Peasant women and the spiritual world that the imprint of the past becomes most discernible, for the spiritual practices espoused by Nana and later by Lil Bet are, by design, performed to keep the living in close communion with the ancestors. In exchange for the strength, insight, and protection that the ancestors provide for the living, the living—especially the spirit workers who maintain this exchange—in turn, honor the ancestors through spiritual worship and the attempts to keep ancestral memories alive. Thus, the family's decision to move to the mainland, and then to the North, is a concern for Nana precisely because it will not only weaken the family's ties to one another, but, most critically, will potentially cultivate forgetfulness, and thereby strain the family's ties to the ancestral world.

Despite differences in genre and content, Dash's film and novel iterations of *Daughters of the Dust* are in close conversation with the works of Josephine Baker, Katherine Dunham, and Ntozake Shange that I have already explored in this project. For instance, the *Daughters* story shares with Baker's *Princess Tam Tam* an underlying diasporic impulse; while this is expressed in Baker's film through her climatic performance of the conga, it is interwoven into the meandering, narrative style seen in Dash's film and novel. Her choice of style departs from mainstream film and literary conventions, in much the same way that Shange's formulation of the choreopoem broke away from Broadway and black theatrical forms of her time. The ritual foundations of Shange's choreopoetic form invited deep emotional engagement, as did Dunham's choreography and depiction of the

lynched body almost a quarter-century earlier. Dash shares with these women artists an appreciation for emotion, which created a way for her to both connect to and affirm the experiences of her audience members. The connections between Dash's film and literary productions and the work of her creative foremothers suggest, first, the rich and intertextual quality of Dash's work; and second, the continuation of a longstanding concern about how to craft a story around the African American past.

Whereas the spiritual practices of ritual, divination, and possession have pervaded my theorization of the creative process, and also provided the theoretical scaffolding for my theorization and treatment of the African American past in the preceding chapters, the spirit world emerges in *Daughters of the Dust* as an invisible albeit sensed presence or realm that is readily acknowledged and venerated by the characters. In this chapter, I show how Dash's particular challenge of dealing with the past is to not only write and film a story about an African American family at the turn of the twentieth century—a story or collection of images that did not exist even in the late twentieth century cinematic arena—but to do so in such a way that traces the outlines of the invisible presence of the spiritual, ancestral world. To undertake this exploration, I consider Dash's historical, creative methodology using Edwidge Danticat's notion of "creation myth," and a Gullah recipe that Dash presents in her book on the making of the film. I also reflect upon Dash's struggle to find a film distributor and to bring *Daughters of the Dust* to a wider audience. This difficulty rested in large measure on the film industry's inability to imagine that anyone would be interested in a black woman's film about other black women at the turn of the 20th century. I am especially interested in this, because it illustrates the costs and obstacles of saying *yes* to ghostly confrontation. Finally, turning

briefly to the novel, I focus on one particular scene in which Amelia and her cousin Lucy (Lil Bet's sister), having come across the remains of three haphazardly buried slaves, help to issue last rites and usher the spirits back into the ancestral world. This scene brings *Rituals of Return* full circle, and illustrates how, at the end of the century, Dash is able to craft a ritual of return for these spirits who, in Beloved-like fashion, have lingered in the work of women artists such as Baker, Dunham, and Shange.

I Never Planned a Career as a Filmmaker

“All artists, writers among them, have several stories,” writes Edwidge Danticat, “that haunt and obsess them.”⁵ As a writer who is interested in the connections between the past, memory, and the migrations of cultures, bodies, and traumas, Danticat suggests, as has playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, that haunting and the ghostly are central to the way we understand the creative process of artists generally, and writers particularly. Danticat suggests that we call these stories “creation myths” as a way to call attention to their monumental, timeless quality, and to the way they structure how the artist engages, interprets, and navigates the world around them. The hauntings are so powerful that artists often “feel as though [they] have always known [these myths],” perhaps even “[filling] in the curiosity-driven details through photographs, newspaper and magazine articles, books, and films.”⁶ Danticat's creation myth is about an execution in Haiti, one that always lingers in her creative process. Unable to shake the gravity and omnipresence of her creation myth, she must filter her stories through it, extending its life, its reign, and its imprint in the mundane world.

Julie Dash's creation myth, it seems, is not as grave as Danticat's. In the place of executions and torture are two creation myths, the first of which is a series of stories of her family's migration from the islands off of the South Carolina coast to New York. Dash talks about this aspect of her creative process in a book on the making of *Daughters of the Dust*.⁷ Dash's family stories "sparked the idea of *Daughters of the Dust* and formed the basis for some of the characters" (5). But when Dash probed her family for more information, they were often reluctant to share any details. When the conversation "got too personal, too close to memories they didn't want to reveal, they would close up, push me away, tell me to go ask someone else" (5). It was then that the young filmmaker knew "that the images [she] wanted to show, the story [she] wanted to tell, had to touch an audience the way it touched [her] family" (5).

By the time Dash came to that realization, she had left her childhood home in the Queensbridge Housing Projects in Long Island City, New York, graduated from City College in New York with a degree in film production, and attended the American Film Institute in Los Angeles as one of the youngest fellows admitted by the Institute (AFI). The young woman who had never planned a career as a filmmaker—who, in fact, aspired to be a secretary or join the Roller Derby (1)—was now making acquaintance with filmmakers Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, and Larry Clark. Using her training at the Institute, Dash was preparing to make films about African American women, and "to tell stories that had not been told. To show images of our lives that had not been seen" (4). Embedded within Dash's desire to tell black women's stories is the second creation myth, the second reason why Dash was obsessed with creating a story such as *Daughters of the Dust*. For Dash, the absence of black women's stories and images in the mainstream

suggested that black women did not have a cultural history, voice or experience of their own, which was for her a far-fetched idea, for her relationships with the women who raised her and who lived in her old neighborhood had taught her otherwise.⁸ Thus, as *Daughters* took shape over the next several years, it became her way to “evoke ancient sensibilities, [and] to challenge the conventional formats of representing Black women in the genre of historical drama.”⁹

Dash originally envisioned *Daughters* as “a short silent film about the migration of an African American family from the Sea Islands off the South Carolina mainland and then the North” (4). The film would have a “Last Supper” quality as family members prepared to make their departure, perhaps fellowshipping with each other for the last time on the land that their family had known for generations. Dash first had this idea around 1975, while she was still affiliated with AFI. The idea was largely shaped by the stories and phrases her family told and used, as well as a “series of James Van DerZee photos of black women at the turn of the century. The images and ideas combined and grew” (4). A few years later, Dash received a Guggenheim grant to research and write a series of films featuring black women, which led to her 1983 film *Illusions*. It was during this time that she began her archival research for *Daughters of the Dust*.

Obsessed with finding research on the cultural history of the Sea Islands, Dash conducted research at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem; the National Archives, Library of Congress, and Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C.; and the Penn Center on St. Helena Island, off the coast of South Carolina. Dash’s archival research marks her need to “fill in the curiosity-driven details” of her creation myth, which, as Danticat suggested, was a pivotal practice in the artists’ creative process.

As the story of *Daughters* evolved, these archival details became the basis for a “cinema of images and ideas.”¹⁰ Whereas images and stories that reflected the broad range of black women’s experiences were not prevalent in the mainstream cinema, Dash could, as did Dunham and Shange, turn to the archive—as a source of images and information—to fill in those spots where her own memory, or her family’s memory, grew dim. Using these images, Dash would be able to create a visual narrative that was nonetheless universal enough to “take [the audience] back, take them inside their family memories, inside our collective memories” (5). After completing most of her research in 1985, Dash turned to writing the script for *Daughters of the Dust*, wading with each word further and further into the ancestral burial grounds.

How to Make Gumbo: A Lesson on Methodology

By the time Dash began the script, she was likely inundated by the multitude of images and ideas that she amassed during her archival research. How, though, would she craft these curiosity-driven details around her hope to evoke ancient sensibilities and, at the same time, re-present black women’s experiences within the genre of the historical drama? In the frontpages of her book on the making of *Daughters of the Dust*, Dash offers what I identify as a culinary allegory for her historical and creative methodology. She presents two traditional Geechee recipes, one for Aunt Gertie’s Red Rice and another for Mommy Dash’s Gumbo. In true recipe form, Dash lists the ingredients and the appropriate amounts to use, and then walks the reader through each step. In the Red Rice recipe, she begins with the simple instructions “Place the rice in a large bowl of water and scrub the rice between your hands” (viii).¹¹ She continues: “Keep changing the

water until it is clear of starch. Pour off the water.” Traditional cooking, Dash shows us, is not a process of simple addition, but a process that is to be undertaken with care, observance, and even a dash of patience. Once the water rinses clear, it is to be poured off, and the ordeal of cooking begins. As Dash guides the reader/cook through the directions, she intersperses the directions with some advice, “Never put a spoon in rice that’s cooking,” but does not attribute the quote to anyone specifically, although one might reasonably presume that it comes from the recipe’s namesake Aunt Gertie. She continues, “Every grain [of rice] must stand on its own. Every grain must be red.”

Embedded in Dash’s directions for Aunt Gertie’s Red Rice is the methodology that she used to create *Daughters of the Dust*: using the tools of family stories, the inspiration of her creation myth, the details that she amassed from her archival research, and her own imagination, Dash divined a story, or brought together these seemingly disparate methods and knowledges, by toggling between the individual and the collective, the singular and the synecdochical. In so doing, Dash joins in the cohort of women artists that I have explored in this project, who also share the task of telling a story of a culture through the singularity of the individual story. In each case, the women took special care to both write about *and* perform their work. Communicating an African American and diasporic past to those who were either not ready to see that past, or would not see it on account of their own political or social needs, must have taken the kind of care, observance, and patience that Dash identifies in her recipe. Similarly, the way that Dash creates a system of knowledge that honors both institutional education alongside what Toni Morrison might call other ways of knowing (i.e., never put a spoon in cooking rice) reflects the kinds of knowledges—kinesthetic, mythical, spiritual, experienced—that

Baker, Dunham, and Shange similarly deploy in their creative work. Yet, in red rice fashion, each of these women, Dash included, do so in their own way, while their selves simultaneously disappear and are revealed within the throes of possession. That is, each woman artist's self disappeared as she took in the flood of memory and historical fact, and was revealed again as she filtered this knowledge through her personal story and creative training.

Dash's methodological lesson continues as she instructs readers on how to prepare Mommy Dash's Gumbo.¹² The ingredient list includes the classic must-haves for a good gumbo, from okra, shrimp and tomatoes, to onions and bell peppers. Again, Dash offers an additional piece of information in an aside: "As with many gourmets, Mommy Dash doesn't use precise measurements. For best results, rely on your own sense of taste." The recipe, then, becomes but a guide, a list that is more descriptive and approximate than it is prescriptive. The thrill and reward of cooking this particular dish, Dash suggests, rests in the journey and the process and a willingness to be flexible and discerning, rather than in simple measurements. In this case, personal taste and personal style far outweigh any presumed benefit of exact replication. But, of course, Dash tells us, this is only for those who seek the "best results." The idea of "best" and how it becomes a measure of and a reflection of one's personal taste is important. We get more of a sense why this is the case in yet another note that rests right beneath the recipe. It says: "I was raised on Gumbo; in my house we also called it Okra Soup. Gumbo has been described as the "poor man's meal," or a "Saturday dish," prepared when you emptied your refrigerator at the end of the week. As far as I'm concerned Gumbo is a luxury. It takes all day to prepare (to do it right) and the fresh okra required to make it can be difficult to locate and expensive."

Preparing Mommy Dash's Gumbo requires work and diligence. In addition to going through the leftovers, the recipe took time, an ingredient that many black working folks may or may not have had on hand. In order "to do it right," the cook would have to dedicate the better part if not the entire day to making the soup, because it took time to do it correctly. Continuing to read Dunham's random notes as an allegory for crafting a story around the African American past, I find this particular recipe for gumbo particularly revealing. Crafting such a story requires time, but, more important, it requires the patience that Dash revealed earlier. It requires going back to the archive (i.e., the refrigerator) again and again in the quest to piece together the remnants or leftovers (i.e., the food from the refrigerator) into the semblance of a story (i.e., the gumbo).

Here Dash identifies the most important aspect of her methodological approach: the remnant. In *Rituals of Return*, the remnant, or remain, has taken on the shape of Beloved-like figures who refuse to observe the border between the spiritual and mundane worlds. Each of the women whose work I've studied in this dissertation has helped me to understand this more vividly: Baker through a theorization of black dance that acquires the binding power of narrative, binding her life and experiences to those slaves who danced the conga on plantations in another time and place; Dunham in her own archival research to create *Southland* and the way she dramatized the notion of remains through Richard's lynched body; and Shange in her formulation of the choreopoem, which binds twenty different poems-stories together. Underlying these instances, and what connects the women artists' works across time and genre, has been a kind of heteroglossia, or the babble of these remnants as they converse with one another. This factor morphed over the course of the dissertation, manifesting first as the exuberance or visual noise of

Baker's dancing, then moving in the Dunham chapter to the way Richard's lynched body was in steady conversation with the couples' jagged, disjointed dancing. And finally in the Shange chapter, heteroglossia revealed itself as each colored girl added her story to the garland of poems that comprise the piece, and especially in the final spell when the young women come to the realization that the chaos of heteroglossia is itself the peace they had strived to acquire.

Dash likely had to navigate the chaos of heteroglossia as she continued working on her script. After working to piece together the snatches of stories and images, Dash was finally ready to begin filming in late 1986, and applied for and received grants and production money from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Fulton County Arts Council of Georgia, the Georgia Council for the Humanities, and Appalshop, Southeast Regional Fellowship (SERF). Through a strong working collaboration with director of photography and coproducer Arthur Jafa (A.J.) and production designer Kerry Marshall, and with the support of those such as friend and fellow black filmmaker Charles Burnett, and Gullah historian Dr. Margaret Washington Creel, Dash did initial shooting in 1987. She resumed the fundraising campaign some time later, this time hoping to raise the \$800,000 needed to complete the film. She put together a package that included a completed script, a sample of the film, a filmography of previous work, and her revised budget, and sent the package to studios in the U.S. and Europe. Given the strong focus on black women at the turn of the century, the strength and viability of the black family, and the absence of "characters who were living in the ghetto, killing each other and burning things down," Dash says that every major studio either passed or failed to respond (8). The general response from Hollywood studios expressed how impressed they were with

the visual aesthetics of the film, but “somehow they couldn’t grasp the concept. The could not process the fact that a black woman filmmaker wanted to make a film about African American women at the turn of the century” (8).

Soliciting the aid of European studios did not offer better results, for responses ranged from “too radical in its concept” to “too much like a typical American film” (8). Dash’s most sympathetic response came from Women Make Movies Too, a New York-based organization, who held a benefit fundraiser for Dash’s project in 1987. However, it was in 1988 that Dash got a break that sent the project into production. While at the PBS Rocky Mountain Retreat in Utah, Dash met Lynn Holst, who through her connections with American Playhouse, helped to secure most of the money for *Daughters of the Dust*. After a two-phase process—the first of which focused on reworking and further developing the screenplay, followed by the production phase—Dash and her team began working on production in August 1989. After several setbacks—including Hurricane Hugo, which slammed into the Carolina coasts and demanded the crew’s immediate evacuation, and Dash’s painful decision to have an abortion, not to mention the difficulty of working with the occasional temperamental artist—Dash’s actors and production crew survived a punishing, albeit exciting twenty-eight days of intense shooting.

In debt and now faced with the task of editing the movie, Dash mounted another fundraising campaign, this time receiving a fellowship from the Rockefeller Foundation, and postproduction monies from the National Black Programming Consortium. By December 1990, Dash finally had a fine cut, which pushed her into the search for a distributor. During this time, Dash worked with John Barnes to produce the original music score for the film. The film owes a lot of its magical and mysterious quality to

Barnes' musical score. Dash recalls that Barnes "used a myriad of instruments, including the synclavier, the Middle Eastern santour, African bata drums and African talking drums, and he successfully mixed syn-clavier-based percussion with authentic music from Africa, India, and the Middle East" (16). They used the music to depict various religions, "including traditional West African worship rituals, Santeria, Islam, Catholicism, and Baptist beliefs" (16). To do so, Barnes drew from his own spiritual beliefs and deep respect for astrology. Their work took them ten continuous, nearly sleepless days, bringing them closer, Dash knew for sure, to a successful contract with a distribution company.

She was wrong. All of the distributing companies passed on her film, saying that there was "no market" for a film such as hers. Encountering what she had seen and heard while she was looking for production money, she remarks, "Again, I was hearing mostly white men telling me, an African American woman, what my people wanted to see. In fact, they were deciding what we should be allowed to see. I knew that was wrong. I knew they were wrong" (25). Dash hoped to increase her chances for a distributor by showing *Daughters of the Dust* on the festival circuit. Her lineup included the 1991 Chicago Black Light Festival, the Munich Film Festival in Germany, the London Film Festival, and the Festival of Women in Spain, and the prestigious Sundance Festival. While showing at the Sundance Festival in 1991, *Daughters* won the award for best cinematography. Dash's search went on until September 1991, when Kino International, a small New-York based distribution company, agreed to distribute the film. (Kino also distributes the digitally restored versions of Josephine Baker's French films from the first half of the 20th century.) Dash's team worked with a small African American public relations firm, KJM 3, to

arrange publicity, and pushed for big openings across the country. Her exposure on the big screen brought in more requests for interviews and even more exposure in national magazines and newspapers.

Dash was pleased that *Daughters of the Dust* had finally made it to the screen. Dash reflects on the occasion, ending on a note that is reminiscent of Shange's departing words in the preface to *for colored girls*:

As I watched people file out of the theater on opening night, I felt all kinds of emotions. I was happy to see my work so well received; I was moved by the emotion on the faces of the people, especially older African Americans; I was proud to be contributing to the growing power of African American filmmakers, telling the stories of our people; and I was relieved that the voices of our women were finally being heard. But I didn't bask in the success of *Daughters* for too long. By the time it opened, I was already promoting the next film" (26).

To Heal Our Imperialized Eyes: *Daughters* and the Literary Sequel

Daughters of the Dust is set on Dawtuh Island, an imaginary island among the geographically real islands that dot the South Carolina and Georgia coastlines. These islands were considered the Ellis Island for Africans, and as such, served as a processing area of sorts, where the enslaved Africans were checked and prepared for their departure to either the Caribbean or other parts of the United States. The islands also marked a geographic confluence of African cultures and languages; as a result, the region became one with "the strongest retention of African culture" in the United States (6), which, over time, merged with the culture of indigenous Cherokee populations, which was represented in the film through the character of St. Julien Lastchild (played by M. Cochise Anderson), the last Native American man who lived on the island. The film depicts an amicable, respectful relationship between Lastchild and the black men on the

islands, and also introduces a sweet courtship between Lastchild and Iona Peazant. By depicting these relationships, Dash not only captures the regional-specific nuances of Gullah-African American history, and how intimately it was intertwined with the fate of other communities, but also offers new images to associate with African American culture.

In fact, showing such details that were largely lost in the popular African American historiography and psychohistory proved to be one of the greatest challenges Dash faced while crafting the film. Dash wanted to offer new visual symbols for old ideas. Take, for instance, Dash's use of blue stain of indigo. As the film shows, and Dash describes in a discussion with bell hooks, many enslaved Africans farmed indigo on the Sea Islands. As an alternative to relying on chains and the whip as commonplace visual representations of slavery, Dash chose, instead, to visually narrate the haunting quality of slavery through the deep blue stain that viewers see on several of the character's hands. Amid the constant reminders from Dr. Margaret Washington Creel, the historical advisor on the *Daughters* project, that the blue stain would have not remained on the slaves' hands after all those years, Dash explained to Creel that she understood that point, but wanted to "create a new kind of icon around slavery" since "we've become very calloused about [seeing symbols of slavery, such as the whip and chains]." ¹³ By marking the body with color rather than scars of whippings, Dash requires the audience to grapple with a history that was visually presented *and* represented in a very different way.

The body figures prominently in another of Dash's attempts to present new iconography for the African American past. *Daughters* highlights the story of Eli (Nana's grandson) and Eula, a young couple who live on the Island. Eula, we learn, has been raped, probably by a white landowner. In one encounter between them, Eli, angry and

vengeful, pleads with Eula: “Tell me who has done this to us.”¹⁴ Eula, slow to respond and in a gesture of protection for her child, instinctively puts a hand across her stomach.

“No,” Eula says, “nothing good will ever come from knowing...” (101). In a moment of tenderness, Eli reaches out to Eula, perhaps to console her, but certainly as a gesture of grief for their past, and now, their future together, which would always be marked by this tragedy. Despite Nana’s insistence that he would never have a baby that wasn’t sent to him from the ancestral world (94), Eli’s grief is heightened, too, by his fear that the Unborn Child is not his, but the rapist’s.

While Eli approaches the issue of Eula’s rape with anger and frustration for his inability to remedy his and Eula’s situation, Eula has other issues to consider. The *Daughters* story is set in 1902, a historical moment when lynching was used as a primary mode of social control. Despite her own need to reckon with the man who assaulted her, not to mention her need to feel protected by her husband and allow him to avenge her pain, she is forced nonetheless to stay quiet, knowing that her actions could potentially yield a fatal situation. This is brought out in more detail in Eula’s conversation with Yellow Mary:

Yellow Mary (to Eula):

At the same time, the raping of colored women is as common as the fish in the sea. (pausing) You didn’t tell Eli who did it, did you?

[Eula] shakes her head no.

You've got a good man, Eula. Somebody you can depend on. He doesn't need to know what could get him killed.

In silent agony, Eula caresses her swollen belly. She has been holding so much in for so many months. Yellow Mary's cautioning words are comforting, but her words are also a dismal reminder to Eula of their position in this Jim Crow society. Eula fears for her husband, Eli, as well as for the future of her Unborn Child. And, as we watch Eula, we continue to HEAR Yellow Mary's O. S. voice.

(softly, to Eula) There's enough uncertainty in life without having to sit at home wondering which tree your husband's hanging from. . .*(firmly)* Don't tell him anything. (124-124)

Yellow Mary urges Eula to maintain her secrecy, for it leaves less uncertainty about whether Eli will be lynched on her account. Whereas Katherine Dunham necessarily depended upon the grotesque figure of the black lynched body to communicate her frustration with the hypocrisy of American democracy, Dash chooses to turn away from the grotesque. There is, then, no brutalized black body on display, for, again, viewers in this country are desensitized to the imagery of lynching and to the black suffering that it causes. Despite its absence, the lynched body yet, and perhaps equally powerfully, leaves its imprints on the stories and the choices that the women make. We might continue this line of discussion to also include the issue of rape. In her attempt to present new iconography for the past, Dash had to not only find a way to weave the matter of lynching into the *Daughters* story, but to also comment on the prevalence of black women's rape, which was an equally important historical matter. By refraining to depict the rape act itself, she returns to a methodology of storytelling that I also discussed in the Dunham chapter: like the early twentieth century women playwrights such as Georgia Douglas Johnson and Angelina Grimké, and even Dunham in her choice to show the actual lynch act offstage, Dash, in similar fashion, chose to reveal the impact of the rape through the emotional turmoil that it caused. By aligning Dash's creative, methodological choice with Dunham, Johnson and Grimké, we can take note of at least one strategy of dealing with the past that is not only effective, but which also potentially forms the basis of a tradition that binds women's works across time and genre.

We might further consider Dash and her literary sequel to further examine this claim, which inevitably revisits some of the major issues that I have already addressed in this project. In the Preface to Dash's book on the making of *Daughters of the Dust*, writer Toni Cade Bambara hails Dash's film as "reactionary cinema for an emancipatory purpose." Dash, Bambara suggests, "intends to heal our imperialized eyes."¹⁵ Dash is able to do this healing work in part by again making certain creative, methodological choices. These choices include technical ones, such as what kind of film to use (Dash prefers Agfa-Geveart film over Kodak, because "Black people look better on Agfa"¹⁶) and choosing to only film in natural sunlight rather than in a studio. In her attempt to offer a new visual for African American history, Dash eschews a master narrative in favor of a "nonlinear, multilayered unfolding," hoping to capture visually what she was doing narratively.¹⁷ As a result, viewers are taken into the intimate spaces of family life and women's spheres. Viewers are also privy to the many conversations happening in these spaces as the camera offers a series of close-ups of the black women in the film. Brought within these intimate spaces, viewers are able to connect to African American women's history through the frame of love and respect for children and the elderly.

That love and respect, though, are among the expected qualities of a community that is in close contact with their ancestors. The world that Dash creates visually allows for this inter-realm connection through the character of the Unborn Child, who has been sent by the ol' souls to help the family stay true to their customs. Dash establishes this world in the opening moments of the film, when a woman's voice recites the following words:

I am the first and the last.
I am the honored one and the scorned.

I am the whore and the holy one.
I am the wife and the virgin.
I am the barren one, and many
are my daughters.

I am the silence that you can
not understand. I am the
utterance of my name.¹⁸

These words are taken from the Gnostic Bible. The omnipotent, omnipresent “I” assumes a state of being, and occupies the balance between a series of extremes. The specificity and individuation of the “I” is subsumed by its own universality. These words quicken the visual images, enliven them, suggesting that they and the images are one. Thus the visual and the poetic act in concert as an invocation of the spirit world, and, when set against the unfolding events, bind it to the mundane.

When Dash releases the sequel to *Daughters of the Dust* as a novel, she maintains some of the choices that made her film so successful. For instance, she maintained the African-griot form of nonlinear storytelling; she presents the novel as a series of vignettes, sometimes introducing new characters, sometimes giving the backstory to events she introduced in the film. Dash’s deployment of these strategies reveals a kinship with Paule Marshall, whose 1983 novel *Praisesong for the Widow* greatly influenced Dash’s work.¹⁹ Both texts share a preoccupation with memory and the past, spirituality and healing, and identity and story, which is seen most vividly in the recount of the story of Ibo Landing, which I will introduce here. After a tumultuous journey, the rush of the ocean finally collapses into the pleasure of sand. *Michael row your boat ashore. Hallelujah!* The ships dock, and just in time for the womb abyss to expel her insides onto solid ground. Bodies emerge, fettered, broken and emaciated. The assault of chains are peculiar pace makers, and, in

chorus, are a reminder that the womb abyss—the open boat, or slave ship—and the green splendor of the sea have brought an onslaught of change already. And now—

standing in what had hours, days, months ago been far ahead of the slave ship's
bow;
standing on the “edges of a nonworld that no ancestor will haunt”;
looking around and studying the place real good, not missing a thing;
seeing everything that would happen to them:
from slavery, emancipation, and the epidemic of lynching and race riots,
to the continued struggles for wholeness and healing;
seeing, too, traces of their lives disappear in the folds of time;
and feeling the violence of finding themselves in the omissions of other people's
stories—

and now, considering all of this, these people turn and look *into* the ship stewards and see no promises of redemption. And without further word, they turned, the Ibo, every last woman, man, and child.²⁰

As the story of Ibo Landing suggests, not even the atrocities of the womb abyss had prepared the Ibo for what they took in once they stepped ashore. One version of the story, such as the one that Marshall depicts in *Praisesong for the Widow*, says that once the Ibo looked ahead and saw what awaited them, they turned, gathered their chains, and walked on the water all the way back to Africa, singing along the way. Marshall's recount of Ibo Landing plays an important part in her story about Avey, a middle-aged black woman who finds herself on a quest to reclaim and reconcile with her African heritage. As a young girl, Avey was sent every summer to her great aunt Cuney, who lived on “Tatem Island, just across from Beaufort, on the South Carolina Tidewater.”²¹ For Marshall, Ibo Landing functions, as it does in Dash's *Daughters* as the material, natural site that nonetheless resonates with the immateriality of the ancestral, spiritual realm. The story of Ibo Landing, thus functions in these two stories as a narrative scaffolding of sorts, a way to introduce and establish the relationship between the spirit and mundane world.

Although Dash uses Ibo Landing as a primary visual in the opening moments of the film, she establishes the interconnection between the spirit and mundane worlds in the opening pages of the novel through something called “telling the lie.” The Unborn Child, Elizabeth, is by this time (1912) ten years old. Readers learn that “telling the lie” is a term for telling a story, and Elizabeth has a certain affinity for the way Miz Emma Julia, an elder, tell the lie. Right away, Dash establishes a narrative world in which the spiritual and the mundane coexist.

By the time the novel arrives at a scene when Amelia and her cousin Lucy (Elizabeth’s younger sister) happen across the bodies of three haphazardly slaves, readers have been privy to a number of accounts in which the storyteller has encountered the spirit world. Thus, the discovery of these bodies is not simply the excavation of an old artifact; rather the discovery resonated throughout the community as the unresolved violences of the ancestral burial grounds returned and melted into materiality of bone and the mundane. A community that can observe this perspective on death is a result of Dash’s creative choices that began first in the creation of her film. Because she had already created a rich, visual world where the stories of African American women and the Spirit were privileged and the central points of the narrative, readers can now, reading the novel six years later, buy into her literary sequel. Because readers know that Dash aimed to “heal our imperialized eyes,” and to release black women characters from the violence of display experienced by Josephine Baker, Aunt Hester, Sara Baartman, and Mary Turner, readers now have a frame of reference that allows for the safe, literary unfolding of black women’s stories.

A part of those stories includes how black women are closely tied to the realm of death. As the men build the caskets for the funerary ritual, the women busy themselves with what I called “women’s work” in the introduction to *Rituals of Return*: cooking and readying themselves and others to support the community who will soon gather to pay their respects; preparing charms for the children’s protection; clearing and readying the burial ground; constructing the altar and preparing the elements that will decorate it; and being careful to leave elements like salt behind, for “salt scare de ol spirits.”²² The women followed Miz Julia’s instructions, each one feeling “what they had missed when...this [funerary] ritual had disappeared from their lives.”²³ These women are responsible for creating the ritual space in which community members bond with one another, and in which the community then evokes and restores its connection to the ancestral world.

I have worked in *Rituals of Return* to situate Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash as participants in this world of “women’s work” where they recuperate the stories of the past in the hopes of shaping their lived situations for the better. Their works lend legibility to the chaos of an African American past that sometimes evades capture, but nonetheless leaves its imprint on the creative process. Baker’s, Dunham’s, Shange’s, and Dash’s creative efforts thus illustrate how “the artistic impulse,” as poet Elizabeth Alexander has called it, is often the most prominent and immediate way to communicate and remain close to the African American experience. In *Rituals of Return*, I have elaborated upon this idea of the artistic impulse by paying close attention to how Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash have created their stories around the lingering presence of the dead—that is, taking note of the special devices that must be created, and the necessary risks must one take to say *yes* to ghostly confrontation. In each case, this cohort of women artists have evinced an

impassioned search for black voices and lives, remnants often buried within someone else's story. Threading together these remains through dance captured on film or in partial program notes, the enactment of the choreopoem, and the novel, Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash showcase how the artistic impulse creates the bridge between materiality and immateriality, past and present.

However, the implications of impulse also raises another important objective of this project. In its connotation as a sudden strong urge or desire to act, impulse resonates one, with my insistence on the agency of the past; and two, with Avery Gordon's notion of the "something-to-be-done" that paves the way for my use of ritual. On the first count, the agency of the past was particularly important given my attention to creative process. Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks offered the framing device for this exploration while also highlighting the role the past plays in the creative process in a short critical essay entitled "Possession." For Parks, creativity, and playwriting specifically, is a deep and intrinsic state of history making achieved by consorting with the past and then carving out a place for the past to dwell in the creative product. Parks likens this process of history making to locating the ancestral burial ground, an idea that I introduced in the introductory chapter of *Rituals of Return*. I was drawn to Parks' idea because it articulated how an artist's creative process, and not the dramatic content only, was deeply indebted to and entangled with the African American past. Because so much of African American history has been "unrecorded, dismembered, washed out," one of Parks' tasks as a playwright is to use the "special strange relationship between theatre and real-life to locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, [and] write it down" (4). For Parks,

the process of writing not only documents, but ontologically is a consortium between the playwright and the ancestral realm, and more broadly between the artist and the past.

This project was a rare instance in which the featured women artists were both the performers, or creators of performance, *and* the writers. By unearthing the connections between process and the past in the works of Baker, Dunham, Shange, and Dash, I began to understand the artistic impulse as that something-to-be-done, or the response to that urge to act for a greater good. For Dash, this is reflected in the urgency she felt to research, to gather visuals, poetic images, and information that she then used to create her story. In this regard, *Daughters of the Dust* takes on the flavors of Mommy Dash's gumbo, created from remains to nourish and heal.

I have attempted to capture the nourishing and transformative essence of their women's work through close attention to their creative process, for, when considered through the lens of ritual, it evidenced that place where the spirit and mundane worlds collided, where the ahistoricity of the ancestor stood in tension and sometimes in redemption with the historical fact of the living world. By looking at this aspect across time and genres, across styles and artistic training, I stand as a witness to Hortense Spillers' notion that "traditions are not born. They are made. We would add that they are not, like objects of nature, here to stay, but survive as created social events only to the extent that an audience cares to intersect them."²⁴ Thus my work in *Rituals of Return* ultimately demonstrates how literature not only begets literature, but also the ways in which literature and performance beget dance and film which consorts with drama and journalism. Thus, performance and literature each have their unique qualities, yet are not separate from, but dependent upon and intimately entangled with the creation of the

other. This understanding of tradition and of my exploration of it in this project accounts for the varied progeny that are divined through our foray into the ancestral burial grounds.

In closing, I want to return to Dash precisely because her foray into the ancestral burial grounds at the end of the 20th century allowed her to create the ritual of return that her characters issue to those three haphazardly slaves who have returned to be set free. As Miz Emma Julia issues last rites to the dead, Amelia can feel the pain that was yet fresh and intact from the experience of slavery. The elders carried the brunt of that pain, and Amelia will never “forget how one woman had thrown her apron over her head, crying bitter tears when asked about her family. The young ones knew these stories [too], having heard them all their lives, and [as they now buried the remains of the slave ancestors, the young ones] burned with fresh anger at their retelling.”²⁵ *Having heard them all their lives*. With this statement, Dash extends Danticat’s notion of creation myths to her characters, showing how they—like Baker; like the café patrons in Dunham’s *Southland*—are never completely out of the grasp of their creation myths. Yet, like Shange, Dash shows how the crisis of pain—others’ or our own—must always bow to power of ritual.

Chapter 4 (Dash) Notes

¹ Shange, *for colored girls*, x.

² Toni Cade Bambara, Preface to *The Making of Daughters of the Dust*, xii.

³ Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust: A Novel* (New York: Plume, 1997), 85.

⁴ Julie Dash and her production team compiled a press kit, which their distributor Kino International released as a way to prepare critics for what they would see in the film. Dash expressed concerns in many interviews that critics nonetheless judged and critiqued *Daughters* based upon their own perceptions, rather than upon her intention, process, and purpose as she outlined it in the press kit. For Dash, this was clearly an expression of the critics' own racist, sexist, and cultural myopia. For more, see Dash's interview with bell hooks in *Daughters of the Dust: The Making of an African American Woman's Film*, 27-67. See also "Not Without My Daughters," a dialogue between Dash and literary critic Houston Baker, Jr. in 1992.

⁵ Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously: The Immigrant Artist at Work*, 5.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Dash, *Making*, 5. Subsequent page citations will be noted in the text.

⁸ Dash, Press Kit, "The Director's Statement," 6.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ All quotations used in reference to Aunt Gertie's Red Rice recipe are taken from p. viii of *Making*.

¹² All quotations used in reference to Mommy Dash's Gumbo recipe are taken from p. ix of *Making*.

¹³ Dash, *Making*, 31.

¹⁴ The script of *Daughters of the Dust* is also included in *Making*; page references will be included in the text.

¹⁵ Dash, *Making*, xii.

¹⁶ Patricia Mellencamp, "Making History: Julie Dash," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies* 15, no. 1 (1994), 89.

¹⁷ Dash, *Making*, xiii.

¹⁸ Dash, *Making*, 76.

¹⁹ Dash, *Making*, xi-xii.

²⁰ This opening paragraph is inspired by two texts: first, by Édouard Glissant's theorization of "The Open Boat," or the slave ship, which he offers in *Poetics of Relation*, 6-7. The quote "edges of a nonworld that no ancestor will haunt" is taken from p. 7 of this text. Second, I am inspired by author Paule Marshall's recount of the story of Ibo Landing, which she offers in her 1983 novel *Praisesong for the Widow*, 37-40.

²¹ Marshall, *Praisesong*, 31-32.

²² Dash, *A Novel*, 239.

²³ Dash, *A Novel*, 237.

²⁴ Hortense Spillers, "Afterword: Cross-Currents, Discontinuities: Black Women's Fiction" *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 250.

²⁵ Dash, *A Novel*, 244.

EPILOGUE

Bone by Bone

We are a people. A people do not throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and as witnesses for the future to collect them again for the sake of our children, and, if necessary, bone by bone.

—Writer Alice Walker, “Zora Neale Hurston:
A Precautionary Tale and a Partisan View”

On June 11, 1945, author Zora Neale Hurston penned a letter to the “Dean of American Negro Artists.”¹ “My dear Dr. [W. E. B.] Du Bois,” she writes: “I think that it is about time that you take steps towards an important project which you have neglected up to this time. Why do you not propose a cemetery for the illustrious Negro dead? Something like Pere la Chaise [sic] in Paris.”² Written from warm, lush Daytona Beach, Florida, Hurston’s letter is tinged with characteristic wit and dry humor. She does not disclose the reasons for her “somewhat peculiar proposal”³ right away nor does she suggest why it is as important a project as she claims. Readers might glean, though, from her mention of *Cimetière du Père-Lachaise* that Hurston, black America’s literary trickster figure, was setting the stage for a potentially somber request befitting the most prominent of the Negro race. For *Cimetière du Père-Lachaise*, the largest cemetery in the city of Paris, France, holds the graves of that illustrious lot of writers, musicians, soldiers and politicians who were either born or established prominent lives in the French capital. “If you like the idea, may I make a few suggestions to you?” she asks Du Bois.

Topping the list of Hurston's four suggestions is that Du Bois should "secure about one hundred acres for the site in Florida." No, not because it is her birth state, she adds hastily, but because Florida's rich vegetation—ranging from magnolia, oak, and camphor trees to hibiscus, crotons, and oleanders that grew freely in the woods—provide the perfect surroundings. "By the time that each well known Negro contributed a tree or two, you would have a place of ravishing beauty," she declares, and rather cheaply obtained too at "five to ten dollars an acre on lakes." Visitors from around the world would flock to this serene setting to pay tribute to the illustrious Negro dead. Being in Florida and all, she adds, it "would be green the year round."

Hurston continues, offering in her second suggestion her vision for a gathering place among this city of the Negro dead. There is no need for a regular chapel, she claims, "unless a tremendous amount of money be secured." Rather "let there be a hall of meeting" decorated by Negro sculptors and painters with "scenes from our own literature and life. Mythology and all." Hurston might very well have had sculptors Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller (1877-1968) and Augusta Savage (1892-1962) in mind, or painters Palmer Cole Hayden (1890-1973), Robert Riggs (1896-1970), Romare Bearden (1911-1988), and Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000). Decorated in images depicting Negro life, history, and mythology, this hall of meeting, standing in lieu of a chapel, would nonetheless take on epic if not spiritual proportions, illustrating the vast reaches of Negro imagination, the suppleness of Negro daily rituals, the staying power of Negro legends, and the ubiquity of the Negro in time. Such depictions, bringing together the ahistoricity of myth and the specificity of the mundane, made the hall of meeting a potentially powerful,

transformative place. It is no wonder, then, that Hurston adds: “Funerals can be held from there as well.”⁴

At the mention of funerals, Hurston’s letter, heretofore characteristically conversational, now acquires focus. With sharpened tone, she proceeds to her third (and most straightforward) suggestion: “As far as possible, remove the bones of our dead celebrities to this spot.”⁵ Hurston does not appoint anyone particular to take on this responsibility to confer with the Negro dead and corral them to this proposed space. Nor does she elaborate upon the means by which one might accomplish this deed. Rather this suggestion sits on a single typed line, purged of meandering discussion of Florida vegetation and interior decoration, its urgency underscored by its brevity. In the still smarting aftermath, readers take in her final but related suggestion: “Let no Negro celebrities, no matter what financial condition they might be in at death, lie in inconspicuous forgetfulness.”⁶ Readers who are familiar with Hurston’s life story—winding as it does from her early years in Florida to the renown of her Harlem Renaissance years to her downward spiral into extreme poverty in the latter years of her life—might wonder if she is making a special appeal for herself. Although she published several notable works during the 1940s, including her memoir *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), political essay “Crazy for This Democracy” in *Negro Digest* (1945), short story “Story in Harlem Slang” in the *American Mercury* (1942) and commercially unsuccessful novel *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948), many of her pieces from this era reflected the relentless impact of “age, ill health, and a spiritual crisis that she experienced, perhaps while doing fieldwork in Haiti.”⁷ Add to this the fact that Hurston had never achieved financial wealth. Unable to support herself solely on her writing, she had been willing throughout her career to

“sell her car and pawn her typewriter” for the opportunity to be a writerly anthropologist.⁸ However difficult her financial shortcomings were, she seemed sure that even if she died without money, somebody would bury her.⁹ Perhaps her correspondence with Du Bois would reveal that unnamed “somebody.”

With the insight of history, Hurston’s entreaty that no Negro celebrity fall victim to inconspicuous forgetfulness—that is, into the kind of disregard that is itself unrecognized or unrecognizable as disregard—no matter their financial situation tugs at the heart strings. Her typical mischief gives way to a pleading that is uncharacteristic of this woman writer known for her pithy, full language. As if to further validate her point, she claims that “we must assume the responsibility of their graves being known and honored.” And for added emphasis:

You must see what a rallying spot that would be for all that we want to accomplish and do. There one ought also to see the tomb of Nat Turner. Naturally, his bones have long since gone to dust, but that should not prevent his tomb being among us. Fred Douglass and all the rest.¹⁰

Nat Turner. Fred Douglass. *And all the rest.* Brought together in physical proximity, Hurston suggests, even the dust of their disintegrated bones would rally forth the very best of the Negro people. What feats Negroes could accomplish, what milestones they could achieve if only they could find those bones—Nat Turner. Fred Douglass. *And all the rest.*—and remove them to this spot.

Amassing a collective, generic “we,” Hurston assumes responsibility with these numerous unnamed others to know and honor the Negro dead. This was more than a notion for Hurston, who admittedly was not an organizer, and who refused to even ask the help of the local black woman activist Mary McCleod Bethune, who, by Hurston’s account, had “never uttered nor written a quotable line, never created any art form, nor

even originated an educational idea. [Bethune had] not even improved on any that [had] been originated.”¹¹ Bypassing the local albeit influential support, Hurston continues her plea to Du Bois: “I feel strongly that the thing should be done. I think that the lack of such a tangible thing allows our people to forget, and their spirits evaporate.”¹² As an aging black woman writer whose spirited writing was consistently clamped by frightened publishers, it is no wonder that she felt as strongly as she did.¹³ Fearing and perhaps already feeling her own spirit evaporate, her appeal to Du Bois, replete with a Zora-style account of her current professional and financial situation, was her decided effort to in some way remain in the embrace of the Negro people and their memory. Without this tangible resting place—for the bones-to-dust of Nat Turner or Fred Douglass, or for the “separate parts,” easy and swallow-ready, of *all the rest*—what, Hurston asks, will become of the illustrious Negro dead?

* * * * *

I first heard of Hurston’s letter to W. E. B. Du Bois, the Dean of American Negro Artists, in a keynote address at the 2011 Black Women’s Intellectual and Cultural History Conference held at Columbia University. Poet Elizabeth Alexander was the speaker and shared some preliminary thoughts on her present study: the pre-history of African American Studies. Alexander was concerned with the genealogies that we inherit as scholars of African American culture and history, and, using the example of Zora Neale Hurston, reminded listeners how the discipline had adapted to the changing demands of time and the particularities of individual educational institutions. Her choice of Hurston as the exemplar of African American Studies was a welcomed reframing of the field. Unlike Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Carter G. Woodson, E. Franklin Frazier and

Molefi Asante, who are often identified as the “founding fathers” of various trends in Black Studies,¹⁴ Hurston was known primarily for her uncensored personality, her “questionable” race politics, and her descent into what she ironically called inconspicuous forgetfulness in the couple of decades following her death. By situating Hurston as an entry figure into the field, Alexander put women’s participation—both as practitioners and as visionaries—in the forefront of the institutionalization of the study of black Americans.

Alexander’s keynote address responded to the conference call to demarcate a black women’s intellectual and cultural history, including ways of recovering black women’s voices and the particular kinds of questions, methods, and methodologies that arose when they were centered in the scholarly crosshairs. In other words, how might one recuperate the voices of those who have toggled between the extremes of hypervisibility and invisibility? How do we piece together the bones-to-dust, the separate parts, and other remains into the semblance of story? And how do we do the least amount of violence to their bodies, stories, and memories in our quest to do so? These questions are of course not at all new to the field of Black Studies or Women’s Studies, but when investigated through the lens of one Zora Neale Hurston, whose work remained out of print for years prior to the recuperative efforts of writer Alice Walker, these questions offer a steady reminder: “pulling from disparity,” Alexander stated, “is how we do our work on African American history.” Our charge is to take the frayed remnants of the past and bid them to speak to and illuminate one another. This, Alexander reminded us, is the work that scholars of black arts and histories must do.

I linger here on Alexander's address because it, along with Hurston's letter to Du Bois, connects several issues that are key to the objectives of this project. Both Alexander and Hurston remind us with urgency that a *we* must care and tend to the fields where the elders await our re-discovery. And where there are only bones, bones-to-dust, and those (sometimes unidentifiable) separate parts, *we* must gather these remains and remove them to a place where they will be remembered and properly interred. Each woman whose work I have studied in this dissertation has done that in her own way, and together comprise one subset of the *we* that both Alexander and Hurston identify. Toeing the line between performers and writers, Josephine Baker, Katherine Dunham, Ntozake Shange, and Julie Dash, sometimes wittingly and sometimes not, assumed the responsibility of rescuing the illustrious and not so illustrious Negro dead from inconspicuous forgetfulness. But as Alexander, in her role as poet *and* scholar, shows us, and as Amelia of Dash's novel *Daughters of the Dust* taught us too, the amassed *we* that Hurston speaks of also includes the scholar.

In closing, I would like to reiterate the continued significance of Hurston's plea to today's scholarly community. Although we presently have an impressive scholarship on black women in the United States acquired through decades of excavation, there is more work to do, more spirits to save from evaporation. As we undertake this work, we have the added support of an ever evolving field as African American Studies strengthens ties with Women's, Gender, Ethnic and Transnational American, and Queer Studies, and reaches out to Performance, Affect, and Trauma Studies. With these tools, we can continue to build a vocabulary about black women's experiences that supplements the enduring archival questions of *who?*, *what?*, and *why?* with close attention to *how?* Such attention to

how makes room, for instance, for the imprint of emotion and spirituality not only as a response to the metaphysical dilemma of being black, women, and alive as it is depicted in the histories and cultural products that we study, but as a critical tool of analysis that we as scholars might bring to this endeavor. Attending to such matters as emotion and spirituality as a part of our methodological process “[pushes] us to reassess the *quality* of our work and lives, and *how* we move in and through them.”¹⁵ That is, it asks that we engage in the kind of self-inquiry that can potentially enable us to better read, apply, and impart black women’s knowledge. Thus when we treat the scholarly endeavor as an opportunity to not only piece together those bones, bones-to-dust, and separate parts, but to also take stock of our inner lives, we inhabit the “bridge that joins [the history and artistry of the women we study] to our commitment to just, compassionate intellectual work.” This bridge is our *yes* to ghostly confrontation and to our responsibilities as scholars who attend to the Negro dead.

The task and challenge of caring for the African American past will undoubtedly remain a defining attribute of African American Studies. And I am sure too that Hurston, an anthropologist, would welcome us into the amassed “we” that she summons in her letter to Du Bois. As we continue to build bridges between ourselves and our work and related fields, may we remain attentive to the wailings that arise from the shadows, for, as Josephine Baker taught us, they summon us to the ancestral burial grounds. May we take heed to ways our scholarship both dignifies and imperils the stories that we want to tell, for, as Katherine Dunham taught us, the story of them all sometimes comes with great acclaim and great cost. May we create places where our subjects can live, for as Ntozake Shange taught us, stories do great work in the world, and through the grace of ritual so

do we. And may our trek through the ancestral burial grounds reap the rewards of wholeness, for, as Julie Dash taught us, there is a call for healing on both sides of memory. And as scholars who co-inhabit the ritual space of creativity with artists and Hurston's illustrious Negro dead, may we make it our duty to gather our geniuses unto us with mittened hands, tenderly, tenderly; to collect them again and again—those bones, bones-to-dust, and those separate parts—tenderly, tenderly, for we know that their rest is our own.

Epilogue Notes

¹ Hurston letter to W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 41.

² Ibid.

³ Editor Herbert Aptheker characterized Hurston's proposal as such in his short introduction to the Hurston-Du Bois correspondence, 40.

⁴ Hurston letter to W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 41; the preceding 4 quotations are also found on page 41.

⁵ Du Bois 42.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, 202. Wall asserts that Hurston's ill health and spiritual crisis resulted in "many pieces that were little more than hack work" (202).

⁸ Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit*, 202. Plant writes specifically that Hurston was willing to do these things "for the opportunity to collect what she called the 'wealth of the continent'—Africana folklore—and to present this wealth through musical productions, dramatic presentations, novels, short stories, essays, and articles" (202).

⁹ Plant, *A Biography of the Spirit*, 203. Alice Walker reveals a related idea during her conversation with Dr. Benton, a longtime friend of Hurston's and landlord of 1734 School Court Street, where she lived before she was removed to the local nursing home: "She came [to Fort Pierce, Florida] from Daytona, I think. She owned a houseboat over there. When she came here, she sold it. She lived on that money, then she worked as a maid—for an article on maids she was writing—and she worked for the *Chronicle* writing the horoscope column" ("Looking for Zora" in *Mother's Gardens* 112). Both Plant's and Walker's accounts resonate with the account that Wall offers in *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*.

¹⁰ Hurston letter to W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 42.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hurston writes: "I am no organizer, and I know it...I like to sit and meditate and go my own way without strings, so that I can say what I want to. That is precious little at present, because the publishers seem frightened, and cut every thing out that seems strong. I have come to the conclusion that for the most part, there is an agreement among them to clamp on the lid. But I promise you, that if you like the idea and go ahead, I will fall in behind you and do all that I can" (Hurston letter to W. E. B. Du Bois in *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 42).

¹⁴ Hazel Carby writes that African American Studies often frames responses to historical periods "within a conceptual apparatus limiting historical interpretation to theories of exceptional male intellectual genius" (263). Although Carby is talking specifically about the immediate decades before and after the turn of the 20th century, the presumed age in African American Studies of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, her comments are relevant in our considerations of the field in the mid- and late-20th century. See Hazel Carby. "'On the Threshold of Woman's Era': Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory."

¹⁵ Tayana Hardin and Grace Sanders, “The Future is Feeling: Emotions, Tenderness and Black Women’s Intellectualizing.” Paper presented at the *Towards an Intellectual History of Black Women Conference*, Columbia University, New York, April 30, 2011. The remaining quotations in this chapter also derive from this source.

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