

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: AMERICAN AFRICAN

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American African is the story of my maternal line of Ancestry dating back to my great- great grandmother, Mary Patmon, who lived on a Native American land reservation located in Crescent, Oklahoma. It is the story of how grief and displacement can manifest in the emotional development of future generations. American African is an exploration of Native American and African intersections through movement. This choreographic interpretation traverses through the parallel lifestyles, shared struggles of slavery, dispossession and the ultimate union of two Nations. The commonly documented union between Native American and African American -Red and Black People in this country came out of a necessity to survive under the unimaginable circumstances which they were forced to endure by White settlers in the United States. Due to the fact that Africans were brought to this unfamiliar soil and terrorized, it was imperative that they escape in order to survive and the Natives of this land helped them to do so. In so many

cases, Native Americans were enslaved right alongside the Africans and as a result, life long bonds were formed. My grandmother, Dorothy Pleasant Stevens, is a product of this union. Red and Black blood runs through my veins and so many other African Americans in the United States. This thesis is a documentation of my process of researching and choreographing my family history.

AMERICAN AFRICAN

by

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DEDICATION

To Pleasant Dorothy Lomas

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Introduction

At the age of 13, I remember walking down the streets of Brooklyn in the summertime adorned in two yards of African printed fabric with my hair wrapped in a traditional African Gele. It was the early 1980s. My destination was Nyabinghi's African Gift Shop on Flatbush and Nevins Street. I would walk into his shop and listen to stories of the powers of African amulets. It was “Naya” who gave me my first Malachite stone in the shape of Africa “to keep me balanced and centered” and a giraffe tooth that he said would keep bad energy away from my house if I hung it on the door. He introduced me to Shea butter for the first time, which he had shipped in from Ghana, West Africa, in a five-gallon plastic pail. It arrived in its purest state, before it was packaged and shelved. He gave me an Egyptian Ankh ring and instructed me to wear it backwards so that my body would absorb its magnetic healing properties and “Florida Water” so that I could cleanse myself of negative energy.

Naya was the first to describe the middle passage to me in detail, which provided a clearer understanding of why the slave trade happened and where we as African people were displaced around the world, especially in the Trans-Atlantic region. He explained that Nigerians and Senegalese were sent to the northern states because they were blacksmiths and worked well with metal. People from inland Nigeria, Ghana and Angola worked in the south because they were skilled farmers. The people from Akan and Ashanti cultures were experienced rice growers, so they were sent to the Carolinas.

On one of my visits to his shop, a gorgeous woman with a chocolate complexion walked in, adorned in a yellow gold flowing dress. She smelled of Egyptian musk and had an arm full of copper bangles that almost reached the height of her elbow. She had a bunch of colorful beaded ankle bracelets on each ankle and a very short haircut. She greeted Nyabinghi by saying “Alafia” which I later learned meant hello and peace unto you. It was the common way to greet if you were of the Yoruba faith, which is practiced in the United States, Nigeria, Cuba and Brazil. Her smile lit up the store and she left an everlasting impression on me as a teenager. That encounter sparked my interest in bead making and the significance of colors and the vibrations that they carry. I began collecting, making and trading beads; people even began to place orders for my creations. This interest in jewelry coupled with the love for African centered movement, be it traditional African dance or African inspired movement, sent me on a quest for more knowledge about myself and people that looked like me. What an exciting journey it has been!

I must give the late Dr. Sherrill Berryman Johnson credit for encouraging me to return to graduate school in pursuit of my M.F.A. several years ago. While we walked the streets of Santiago de Cuba, she painted examples of potential thesis presentations. My great, great grandfather was from Matanzas Cuba and I combed the streets looking for any link that could connect me to that part of my family history, all the while being engulfed in Cuban culture. "Dr. J" thought it might be a great idea to trace the family history through dance and documentation and present my findings as my thesis. From that moment, I've been gathering information.

I was born fifth generation Blackfeet Indian (Sikisika).

*“There are numerous competing origin theories with regard to southeastern Blackfoot/Blackfeet peoples, and the three divisions of the Blackfeet Nation (the Piegan, the Siksika and the Blood) located in Montana and Alberta, Canada. The subject (Blackfeet vs. Blackfoot) is a source of great debate in the Native American Community.”*¹ The roots of my family tree extend into the Congo, Cuba, the Bahamas and Ireland (to my knowledge). This myriad of cultural representations leaves me to ponder the origins of my existence, and that of many other people of African descent here in the United States.

Upon arrival into “The New World” via the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, many Africans became integrated with Native American communities. There were African slaves who escaped slave plantations with the help of Native Americans, who fled into the mountains where they began new lives and lifelong partnerships. There were also Africans who were enslaved by Native Americans who opted to endure the “Trail of Tears” with their Native American owners, rather than remain on slave plantations and be subjected to the brutal life of a southern slave. In so many cases, Native Americans were enslaved right alongside the Africans. These nations lived together, grew together and

¹ *Indivisible, African-Native American Lives in the Americas*; Red, Black and Brown, Artists and the Aesthetics of Life by Phoebe Farris (Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian) p 170.

ultimately intermarried and formed a new Nation, a “Red and Black” union of people: a union so potentially threatening and powerful that it was forbidden by law.

My great, great grandparents Mary and Joe Patmon were descendants of this lineage. The Trail of Tears led my ancestors to The Crescent Oklahoma Land allotment. This is where they would raise 16 or 20 children, including my great grandmother, Essie Salenta Stephens. This is where my grandmother Dorothy Pleasant Stephens would see her grandmother’s “long black wavy hair and flat forehead” and connect herself to her dual heritage for the first time as a young girl. This is my legacy, American African.

My personal journey towards this piece began on May 4, 2009 at 5:22 am. I was awakened by a dream about a Spirit Guide from Africa who protects children and pregnant women. She was dressed in white, watching from above. She had such a peaceful presence. I felt cradled. I didn't know what it meant. I had no idea that I was about to open up a whole new chapter of the family history, including things my mom never knew. It was a journey that I had to embark on for the sake of the new babies being born into the family, as well as understanding the grief that has been passed on from mother to daughter for generations.

The remnants of displacement and grief brought on by social issues such as substance abuse, sudden death and incest, have been a dark cloud hanging over my family tree for generations. While gathering information about these incidents, I ended up

losing my Uncle Rodney Lomas on October 8, 2009 at 1:32 pm. Two weeks before his 59th birthday, he committed suicide by jumping in front of a N.Y.C. train. He was a product of the N.Y.C. housing projects, and was raised by my mom who was left to pick up the pieces after my Grandmother never recovered from a nervous breakdown and my grandfather left for the Navy. Uncle Rodney was a War Veteran, whose alcohol addiction began overseas and worsened once he returned to the U.S. Between not having a mother with a sound mind and having to return to society after contending with the war, he was never able to return to normalcy. He was in survival mode for years, running from his life. His drug addiction turned to alcohol abuse and he just couldn't play the survival game anymore. The grief overcame him and as he expressed to my mom, he felt he was better off dead. Uncle Rodney's death was sudden and unfortunate, but it afforded the family an opportunity to come together after years of everyone being so involved in their individual lives that coming together has not been a priority. The incident put me in touch with Rodney's aunt Willie Beatrice who shared stories of her sister Dorothy Pleasant Lomas (my grandmother) and their grandparents Mary and Joe Patmon.

Although Aunt Beatrice was younger than my grandmother, she had become the family historian. In all actuality, she became my grandmother's voice.² Aunt Beatrice began by telling me about her mother who died in childbirth. Her name was Essie Salenta Stephens and she passed away on October 1, 1939. I knew that spirit was working in that very moment when I glanced at the calendar and the date was October 1!! Aunt Beatrice

² Cummings, Willie Beatrice Phone Interview. 1 Oct. 2009

described the day my great grandma Essie had passed. She was 8 years old and her sister (my grandma) was 10. They were in the hospital, and grandma Essie begged them to never separate. Aunt Beatrice recalled that her mom took both of their hands and said to my grandma, whom she called "Sugg", "I never want you all to separate, and I want you all to stay together Sugg" and then my grandma screamed and screamed! Aunt B. said that she cried because Sugg cried. She said that they buried her mom in a pink dress with roses on it and navy blue shoes.

Aunt Beatrice described her grandmother Mary Patmon as having an "Indian forehead with long hair". She said that Mary and Joe lived on an Indian reservation in Crescent, Oklahoma and had somewhere between 16 and 20 children. She remembers everybody (she and her sister as well) eating outside at a long wooden table. They visited their grandmother only a few times when they were very young.

It felt great to finally have tangible proof of my Native American Blackfeet Heritage. I had always been told about this aspect of our family line, but I now had my ancestor's names and geographical information. I wasn't able to sit down with Aunt Beatrice to get an interview, I've still never met her but I felt like I've uncovered so many unanswered questions in that one 30 minute phone conversation. I haven't been able to connect with her since, because Aunt Beatrice is a busy lady. She has a catering business in Florida and she's very active in her church. She's 80 years of age and getting her to return my phone calls has not been easy. My dream is to have her and her sister meet

once more before they pass. Grandma is 82 now and they haven't seen each other since the 1960's.

Until I spoke with Aunt B, I had forgotten that the mothers of both my grandmothers had died in childbirth. Two months later, when my parents and I attended my father's family reunion in Orlando, I was reminded once again about this legacy of loss. At the reunion, I learned the name of my deceased great-grandmother on my Father's side, Leila Gibson. Leila died in childbirth after giving birth to ten children. Although, I haven't been able to connect my father's side of the family to their direct Cherokee roots, this ancestor Leila Gibson has Cherokee blood as well.

As earlier stated, the spirit guide from my dream, who is referred to as "Nana Aesi" amongst the Akan people of Ghana West Africa, has traveled with my family through the middle passage as so many spirits have for so many displaced Africans in America. This spirit has guided the women in my family, enabling us to carry on in the face of obstacles and misfortune. Also, the characteristics of Nana Aesi are evident in my grandmother, mother, and myself. Nana Aesi's spirit is the protector of children and pregnant women and this unconditional love for children and mothering spirit is evident in the three of us. The lives of my Mother and Grandmother have been wrought with grief and I've worked diligently to end that cycle in my own life. This Spirit, I believe, has shielded me from serious danger and misfortune on so many occasions and I'm so

grateful. My prayer is that it continues to protect the Spirit of my daughter Serwaa, the namesake of a very powerful priest in Ghana West Africa from years ago.

My maternal family roots extend into Cairo, Georgia where my great,-great grand mother's cousin, Frazier Johnson, resided on the family farm. My grandmother "Sugg" remembers visiting this farm often as a small child. This geographical connection between Georgia and Oklahoma leaves me to ponder whether or not my great, great grandmother Mary Patmon ended up in Crescent, Oklahoma as a result of being forced to relocate via The Trail of Tears. I can't even begin to fathom the amount of anger and grief that the women of this population of relocated families had to endure. Is it possible for that grief to have been passed on from one generation to the next? From mother to daughter?

I've watched my own mother's siblings handle the grief of growing up without a mother in their own ways. Rodney, the oldest of the three and the closest to his mother, was never able to fully recover from the absence of his mother, while my other two uncles found refuge in the visual arts and music. Unfortunately, my mother blames herself for the death of her younger brother Rodney. She feels responsible since she raised him. She had to become the head of household and raise her three younger brothers at the age of 10, after her mother had been hospitalized indefinitely. My Aunt Beatrice believed that my grandmother never recovered from the nervous breakdown that she suffered in her late twenties brought on as a result of years of displacement and repeated

rape by a family member. She and her sister were shifted from one family member's home to the next after their mother passed, for years until a family took them in when they were teenagers, but there was no healing process in place. No one ever dealt with the grief that my grandmother suffered resulting from this traumatic experience.

Statement

The remnants of grief, the transfer of that grief from mother to daughter and how to heal from that grief, have been my motivation for this work. How does one recover from such tragedy? How does a Nation begin to heal from so many years of oppression? How do we go about rekindling the "old ways" when we gave honor to God and acknowledged our spirit guides and ancestors in times of need? For the sake of our children and in an attempt to heal a Nation of oppressed people, *American African* serves as a reminder of our past, our resiliency and the fact that spirit is ever present. We will inevitably move forward in this life, but why not with the ancestors at our backs and our spirit guides at our feet?

Excerpts from:

“In the Tradition of God: African Religion from the Akan Perspective”

By Nana Okomfo Yaa Densua (January 2004)

Akan Spiritual Hierarchy

The Supreme Being

The Supreme Being is known by many names (a few examples):

Odomankoma (the author, the creator, the owner and donor of an exhaustible abundance of things;

Nyame (get to be satisfied),

Nyankopan (the Supreme Being),

Twedumpon (to lean on, as a tree, and not bend);

Nyame ne hene (God is King).

The Akan believe that the Supreme Being is both male and female. The female principle is sometimes symbolized by the moon and referred to as the “Good Mother.”

The sun sometimes symbolizes the male principle. The Akposso people of Togo tell that when God made human beings, he first made woman on the earth and bore her the first child. This connects human life directly to God through the woman. The woman herself is created by God and in turn becomes the instrument of human life.

There are no shrines to the Supreme Being. The Nyame Dua serves as the symbol of our dependence on God. The tree either grew in palaces, shrines or houses, or a stump of it with a forked branch was placed at the entrances. A pot containing rainwater was placed on the tree and periodically the water was used to bless the inhabitants of the house or any other person who needed blessings. This further reinforces the belief that God is perfect and so sufficient unto Himself that he does not need shrines or sacrifices

made up of the things He has made. Given the magnificence and majesty of the Supreme Being, sacrifices are offered to the spirits or deities that act as intermediaries, as God is the Ultimate Recipient of all sacrifices offered to the spirits or deities.

Mother Earth

Over much of the world, Mother Earth is regarded as a spirit. In Akan society, the Earth is called Asase Yaa, and ranks after God, as the second to be offered a drink during libation. Asase Yaa is the Mother upon whom we all depend. She is appeased as a spirit, but is not regarded as a divinity. She is not consulted for purposes of divination, as we do with the other deities. Because everyone has direct access to Her, there are no temples or shrines dedicated to Asase Yaa, nor any priests to serve Her. However, offerings and sacrifices are made to Her so that She may help with crops and protect against misfortunes that may befall farmers. There are special days set aside for Her and on these days there is no tilling of the land. Other taboos include the spilling of human blood, especially suicide, and cohabitation in the forest. Sacrifices and/or the pouring of libation are offered to Asase Yaa before a grave is dug. She plays an important role in the morality of the Akan. Asase Yaa is also known to be a zealous supporter of truth.

The Deities

The Akan refer to the deities as Abosum or gods. They are the Children or Messengers of the Supreme Being and serve as the intermediary between God and human beings. They may be male or female and are generally associated with features of the

environment such as rivers, rocks, trees and the sea. They are not confined to these physical objects as they have unlimited mobility and can move anywhere.^{2a}

Male and female priests are trained to serve (or carry) an Abosum. Priests help the people live in harmony with nature, the spiritual world in general, and with each other. The relationship between human beings and the Abosum is practical and reciprocal. We serve the Abosum and submit to their guidance in exchange for protection from evil, to gain and maintain peace, happiness and long life as reward for service and obedience. The Abosum intervene, when requested, in all aspects of life among the people. Though very strict, we believe the Abosum to be impartial in their judgment in all aspects of life. They have a profound effect on the ethical moral codes of the society. We all strive to be highly respectful and obedient, live a commendable life, so that we may keep favor with the Abosum.

The Abosum all have specific functions or assignments from the Supreme Being. For instance, Nana Asuo Gyebi is known as a healer and truth seeker; Nana Adade Kofi is one of the war deities who protects against attack of metal weapons to the body and also provides protection as we travel in cars, buses, trains, boats and planes. Nana Tegare deals specifically with witchcraft and the hunting and capture of evildoers. Other spirits believed to assume personalities are the Mmoatia or “little people.” They are frequently

^{2a} *In the Tradition of God: African Religion from the Akan Perspective* by Nana Okomfo Yaa Densua (January 2004).

referred to as evil, but while they do inflict punishment where it is needed, they have a very protective and creative aspect. The Mmoatia communicate with each other through a whistle language and have an extraordinary knowledge of medicines. It is believed that many herbalists acquired the cures for some unusual diseases from the Mmoatia who tutored them.

The Ancestors

In our tradition, we do not believe that death is the end. It is said, “If God does not kill us, we do not die.” We believe in the interconnectedness of life and death. We are sent from God, travel through the rites of passage: birth, puberty, marriage, and death, then the soul returns to God for His disposition. When death occurs, it is only the physical body that is affected, not the soul. While we understand that everyone upon his/her death would return to various areas of the spirit world, there are some Ancestors whom we pray to and those that we pray for. Those whom we pray to are the center of attention during ancestral rites. This honor is reserved for those Ancestors who have led good and exemplary lives. This rite serves as an important means of social control. The fact that only people of a certain caliber qualify as those we pray to for blessings, regulates behavior by setting the example for individual and groups to conform to proper moral behavior and to live exemplary lives to enable them to qualify for the honor. It challenges us to do our best for ourselves our families and the community. Ancestor reverence is shown in many forms. We serve the Ancestors first during meals, pouring libation to them, and by observing the various festivals and other rites reserved for them.

On Thursdays, we prepare bread that is offered to the Ancestors for prosperity. And every 40 days, we observe the Akwesidae, offering prayers and sacrifices for their blessings and protection and their continued involvement in our lives.

Our Ancestors are empowered to watch over us and have the ability to open doors and clear the way for success in many endeavors in our lives. They intervene between man and the Supreme Being to get prayers and petitions answered quickly and effectively. Too often we are accused of Ancestor worship. This, of course, is incorrect. We honor our ancestors in some of the same ways as other cultures. The honoring of our Ancestors constitutes expression of the belief in the cyclical relationship between the living and the departed. We believe in the cycle of life: the dead, the living, and those yet to be born.

Research

The research for *American African*, the title of my thesis, began with me examining the similarities in ceremonial worship through dance amongst Afro-Native people. While dancing on tour with Ronald K. Brown/Evidence Dance Company in the early 1990's we frequently toured to places like Tempe, Arizona, Albuquerque, New Mexico, Boulder Colorado, New Orleans, LA and places where a strong Native American presence was evident. I had observed the similarities in the colors used for spiritual bead work in both cultures and I was afforded the opportunity to attend a few of these spiritual gatherings in New York City: Red (passion, courage, anger, greed, lust), Yellow (mind,

intellect, optimism, forgiveness, vision), Green (success, versatility, supply, independence, prosperity), Black (reversing, draws all forces, emits none).³ I've also seen the color black mixed with red and worn for funerals in Ghana and in New Orleans. We, as participants, were dressed in all white and the entire ceremony happened in the formation of a circle. Homage was paid to the elders, drummers, and the priests throughout the evening and the participants sang song after song led by appointed singers, using call and response. All of these rituals were performed in an effort to be clean, to be pure in the eyes of God, to get closer to God.

From my own study of West African culture and from my knowledge of being a trainee for priesthood inside of the Akan religion of Ghana, I knew that in Ghanaian culture an African ceremony called an Akom is a spiritual ritual in honor of God, the ancestors and spirit guides, in which spirit enters the body and heightens your spiritual awareness. In Cuban/ Nigerian culture, in addition to honoring God Almighty, a *Bembé* is a party for the spirit guides called Orisha and the ancestors, in which spiritual awareness is heightened enabling communication between worshippers and ancestral spirits. In Native American culture, in addition to honoring God, the Ghost Dance is a healing ritual in which the dancers' spiritual awareness is heightened during the ceremony enabling them to communicate with spirit guides and ancestors. In the ceremonies I observed, I saw that there were similarities in the application of clay to the body during rituals as

³ *Tapping The Power Within, A Path to Self-Empowerment for Black Women* by Iyanla Vanzant p 102-103.

well as the use of herbs, oils and smoke or incense. Earth, wind, fire and water are present in all rituals for both cultures as well.

Needless to say, the similarities were endless. Tiya Miles, contributor to the book *Indivisible, African and Native American Lives in the Americas* writes:

Sharing the experience of race-based degradation and slavery in early American history led to the exchange and re-creation of cultural forms between Indians and Native Americans. Even as discrete indigenous traditions continued to be practiced within nationally specific contexts, Native people who had been parted from their home communities contributed to the formation of a creolized Afro-Native culture. What is more, historian Peter H. Wood and feminist theorist bell hooks have speculated that West African concepts of place and the environment, spirituality, respect for ancestors, and the oral tradition paralleled Native American concepts of the same, thereby facilitating the process of cultural synthesis. In creating objects and enacting practices that derived from their multiple cultural traditions, African and Indian slaves improved the quality of their circumscribed lives and asserted their human rights to cultural self-determination and creative expression.⁴

This documented knowledge of cultural similarities propelled me further into how that first encounter may have played out. I needed to investigate what was known about the first meeting of these cultures: what the circumstances may have been upon the first arrival of African explorers. In the book *Africans and Native Americans, The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples*, the author Jack D. Forbes explains that:

⁴ Wood, *Black Majority*, 116; bell hooks, 'Revolutionary 'Renegades': Native Americans, African Americans and Black Indians,' in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (London: Turnaround, 1992): 180-81. *Indivisible, African-Native American Lives in the Americas; Taking Leave, Making Lives* by Tiya Miles. (Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, 2009) p 145.

It is now well known that the Atlantic Ocean contains a series of powerful 'rivers' or currents which can facilitate the movement of floating objects from the Americas to Europe and Africa as well as from the latter to the Americas. In the North Atlantic the most prominent current is that of the 'Gulfstream' which swings through the Caribbean and then moves in a northeasterly direction from Florida to the grand banks off Terra Nova (Newfoundland), turning then eastwards toward the British Isles and the Bay of Biscay. This current has carried debris from Jamaica and the Caribbean to the Hebrides and Orkneys of Scotland. It should be noted that this eastward flowing current has a southern extension, which swings southward along the West coast of Europe to the Iberian Peninsula and on to the Canary Islands. From the latter region it turns southwestwards and then westwards, returning to the Americas in the vicinity of Trinidad and rejoining the Caribbean segment of the Gulfstream. Thus it would be theoretically possible to float in a great circle from the Caribbean to Europe and northwestern Africa and then back again to the Caribbean.⁵

He also makes mention that Ivan Van Sertima, Leo Weiner, J.A. Rogers and others, have cited evidence, including the 'Olmec' stone heads of Mexico, pointing towards early contacts between American and African cultures. This information not only verified that it was possible for a canoe or any modest boat to ride the Gulfstream current, it also assured me that contact had to have been made with many of the indigenous people of so many of the other Islands that ran along this current.

Contrary to my beliefs and naivety, it took a special boat to navigate the slapping waves of the Atlantic Ocean. The boat of choice was the Egyptian Papyrus reed boat. Dr. Ivan Van Sertima states:

⁵ *Africans and Native Americans, The language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples*, by Jack D. Forbes (University of Illinois Press, 1993) p 6,7.

The Norwegian writer and explorer Thor Heyerdahl has made more than an academic study of these ships. He has put the shipbuilding ideas and designs of the ancient Egyptians to a practical test and proven that their most primitive boats - the papyrus reed boats that were built before their wooden ships - could have made it across the Atlantic from Africa to America. What is extremely interesting about his experiment is not only the demonstration of the seaworthiness and ocean going capabilities of the reed boat, but the fact that some of the far more sophisticated and elaborate boats with rigid wooden frames, built along the same papyrus form design, would not have been able to make it.⁶

However, Jean Merrien a student of trans-Atlantic navigation by small vessels states in his book *Lonely Voyagers that*:

The first attempt - the first success - [of crossing the Atlantic by one man] could only come from the American side, this because the crossing is less difficult in that direction. This is because of the prevailing winds from the west as well as the currents. One can sail in a straight line from Boston via Newfoundland to Ireland or Cornwall with almost the certainty of fair winds. The other direction requires twice the distance, thrice the time, and four times the sweat.⁷

The papyrus reed boat would have been the most likely vessel used to sail westward across the Atlantic. Therefore, I decided to use a model of the papyrus boat as the first vessel used for travel by the Africans. The type of boat helps to establish the timeline in which African exploration was taking place. The first account of an Egyptian papyrus reed boat under sail was in 4000 B.C.^{7a}

⁶ *They Came before Columbus, The African Presence in Native America* by Ivan Van Sertima (Random House New York, 1976) p 56.

⁷ *Africans and Native Americans* by Jack Forbes p 6,7.

^{7a} *Boats of the World: From the Stone Age to Medieval Times* by Seán McGrail p 60.

For the "Second Coming" when the Africans returned to America as slaves, I needed to establish the fact that yes, Native Americans had African slaves, but they themselves were also enslaved by Europeans well before Africans had begun to arrive as slaves. I also needed to portray the group of Cherokees from the East who did not relocate willingly. The Oconaluftee Cherokees, recognized today as the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians were able to remain in Georgia. They did not participate in the march on the Trail of Tears to Oklahoma Territory. According to the Federal Treaty of 1819, because Tsali and the Eastern Band of Cherokee lived in the mountains of North Carolina outside of the boundaries of the Cherokee Nation, they were somewhat bypassed by the removal policies put in place by the Federal government. A Cherokee named Tsali opposed the removal, and remained in the Cherokee Homeland with a small group of about 1,000 Cherokee at Quallatown outside of the boundaries of the Cherokee Nation. They formed a rebellious resistance against the Federal government to thwart the removal of the Cherokee on the Trail of Tears. Tsali was eventually captured, and was executed by the Federal troops in exchange for the lives of the small band he protected – who remained in the Cherokee Homeland and became the modern Eastern Band. All other Cherokees were evacuated by the Federal troops and forced to endure the Trail of Tears.

In the book *The Cherokee Nation and the Trail of Tears*, authors Theda Perdue and Michael Green shared detailed accounts of the brutal conditions that so many Native Americans were able to survive. They state that:

Cherokee removal was only part of a much broader plan to rid the eastern United States of Indians. By the end of the nineteenth century, over sixty

tribes, mostly from the East, had been exiled to Oklahoma; Native people in the Midwest as well as the Cherokees in the South shared the experience of expulsion. There were many incentives in place to move the Cherokees out of the South. Some were offered 'a good Rifle, a Blanket, a Kettle, and five pounds of Tobacco' when he or she enrolled for removal. The treaty promised a blanket to each family member as well. The United States pledged to provide compensation for property left behind, transportation to the West, and twelve months of support upon their arrival. Furthermore everyone who brought along four other Cherokees from the State of Georgia would receive fifty dollars. Two Cherokees were employed to enroll families with this incentive and after six months, only eleven families were willing to enroll.⁸

After a severe winter, enrollment increased to 683 Cherokees, 47 intermarried whites, and 193 African - American slaves out of a population of over 17,000 residents of Georgia.

On average the Cherokees were forced to travel 15 miles per day. In some instances, the trip could average about 826 miles. It took 1,766 people, eighty-eight wagons, 881 horses and a number of oxen to cross the Tennessee River. Four boats worked from dawn to dusk transporting these people. The longer the Cherokees held out, the worse the travel conditions were, due to lack of provisions provided by the United States government and angry whites along the way who robbed Cherokees or even killed them buried them and then demanded money from the United States government to pay for their burial. "Most Cherokees, however, did not ride in wagons or on horseback - they walked. Rebecca Neugin's father, a trail survivor, had a wagon and two teams of oxen,

⁸ *The Cherokee Nation and the Trail of Tears* by Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green (Penguin Books, 2007) p 117-120.

but her parents and older brother walked the entire way." A traveler from Maine reported that "a great many go on horseback and multitudes on foot - even aged females, apparently nearly ready to drop into the grave, were traveling with heavy burdens attached to the back - on the sometimes frozen ground, and sometimes muddy streets, with no covering for the feet except what nature has given them."⁹

Enlightened by this research, I found it imperative that this crucial piece of history be presented as indubitably as necessary in order to reach an audience inclusive of, but not limited to dancers. My main goal was to get this information out to anyone who didn't already know. And because there is no mention of it in any K-12 textbooks that I've come across in my lifetime, my assumption is that my audience is broad. For this reason, I decided to create a palpable time line of events that would encapsulate the story of four generations of women. I wanted the work to unveil itself as a "Ballet" and evening length narrative through dance enhanced by popular music and traditional/contemporary "Afro-Native" inspired movement.

PROCESS

I searched the web for any Native American and African encounters prior to the Atlantic Slave Trade and I came across Dr. Ivan Van Sertima, who wrote the book *They Came Before Columbus*. I remembered reading this book years ago in middle school. It was the first book that I had ever encountered which dispelled the myth that Christopher

⁹ Ibid 136, 137.

Columbus was the first to arrive in America. Dr. Van Sertima explained, that it was actually Don Juan the King of Portugal, who revealed a secret trade route to Columbus that the Africans had already been using to travel to the New World.¹⁰ Dr. Van Sertima also wrote about early African Egyptian explorers and tracked different artifacts around the world that were created by Africans centuries ago which proved that they had indeed been there.

I needed pertinent information about my Native Blackfeet heritage to draw from in order to further develop the events in the timeline, as well as get a feel for the emotional climate of these people. Feelings of displacement, anger and grief, were apparent, but I needed more detailed accounts of transgression for inspiration. I visited the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian as well as the Baltimore Museum of Art, and was very disappointed in the lack of African presence inside of both exhibits. Very discouraged, I reported my findings, or lack there of, to committee member Miriam Phillips who encouraged me to keep looking. She assured me that the information was out there and that I might have to interview people. Lo and behold on my return visit to the Smithsonian, a connection that Miriam referred me to at the Museum suggested that I return for the *Indivisible* exhibit, the first of its kind. It would open in October, just a few weeks away, and I intended to be there.

I began to make a mental list of people that I would have liked to interview. The first who came to mind were my friends Penny and Thunder Williams. Actually they were

¹⁰ *They Came Before Columbus* pp. 8-10.

a part of the development of the *Indivisible* book and exhibit. Penny Williams of the Chappaquiddick Wampanoag Nation is the director of the Ohke Cultural Network and the producer and radio talk show host of the "Talking Feather". Talking Feather radio broadcasts every Sunday at 11am on radio ONE, WOL-1450 AM, Wash D.C. She also works with children of all ages and preserves Native American culture and history through storytelling. She was also a dancer in her early years. Her husband, Thunder Williams, hails from Barbados and is a lawyer, now retired from the Justice Department. He spent a lot of his time doing community outreach and school shows that educated children about American Indian as well as African culture. He told me that he performed primarily in the Maryland school system and explained that the children were really grasping the information and he could see their self-esteem being heightened, but after a few years, his funding was cut and the residency activity had to end. Thunder Williams stated that:

We as African Americans and Native Americans are spiritual land centered people. We have a giving and a forgiving spirit. We came from abundance and we gotta get back to abundance. The Eastern Native American tribes were more able to maintain their cultural existence and survive because they mixed with Africans. The Native Americans gave the Africans the drum back and through African and Native American interwoven call and response coupled with eastern Native American traditional Stomp dance melodies and Round dance songs, the Blues was born.¹¹

Thunder and Penny Williams have been activists on behalf of Native American causes in the D.C. area for years. After a general conversation with him about my area of

¹¹ Williams, Thunder, telephone interview 15 Sept. 2009.
Both Penny and Thunder Williams appear in the *Indivisible* book (p16-19, 245) and exhibition.

study, he too referred me back to *Indivisible*, a project that he and his wife had helped to curate in conjunction with Gabrielle Tayac, the editor of the book *Indivisible, African-Native American Lives in the Americas*.

Indivisible is the first American Indian exhibit to celebrate the African American presence in Native American heritage. As I stated earlier, knowledge of mixed African and Native American heritage could cost a Native American landowner, their land and in some instances, their life, therefore the acknowledgment of this rich dual heritage in a National Museum was colossal. The *Indivisible* exhibit was an amazing event to say the least. I attended one of the forums at the Smithsonian. It was held in one of the conference rooms. We were a room full of African people in search of missing links to our Native American heritage. Every seat was filled. People stood in the back as well. I was fortunate enough to get a seat up front. People traveled from all over the U.S. to attend this event. I even spoke to an elder who was familiar with the Crescent Oklahoma land reservation where my great, great grandmother lived. It was a most overwhelming feeling.

As African Americans, we are taught at an early age to "mind your neighbor because they might be kinfolk". After the Civil War, so many Africans remained separated from family members after being sold away to different plantations. We were so mixed up that to this day, your cousin could be sitting right next to you. But the participants in this seminar brought those six degrees of separation even closer. Could they be possible blood relatives on the African and the Native American side? I could

really be sitting next to a cousin? I was fascinated! Although it was the year 2010 and I had the daunting task of piecing my history together with no tangible information (so, I thought) I was set apart from my other friends who had no information at all. I would soon discern that my forbears name would take me pretty far, and provide me with enough accurate information to move forward with my work.

I listened to the saddest stories, the most grueling nightmares: Entire families wiped out due to fires set by European land mongers. Graves robbed and then uprooted by land developers. The saddest of all, were living elders who are too traumatized to speak of the past, unable to pass on vital family tradition. This rich tradition will expire with them as they near the end of the life cycle. Many of the contributors to the book *Indivisible, African-Native American Lives in the Americas* sat on the panel and answered as many questions as time would allow. The general editor, Gabrielle Tayac stated that the main purpose of the book *Indivisible* was to begin to document this rich oral history of these combined cultures.

After the forum, I connected with Jay Winter Night Wolf, a radio personality on Pacifica radio 89.3 FM. His weekly broadcast is about Native American culture. He is of "Red and Black" heritage and is well versed in "red and black" tradition. Night Wolf served as an important source as I gathered information for the thesis. (Later, he would end up being the live voice of the Tayac elder in the second production of *American African* at the Baltimore Museum of Art).

In order to represent African and Native American solidarity on American soil inside my thesis, I needed to choreographically explore what might have taken place during a first encounter between "Red and Black" Nations. In keeping with the tradition of both Native American and African culture, I thought that the joining of hands in a circle of unity could effectively connect both Nations and serve as a through-line that we refer to throughout the piece.

Choreographically, I began to develop Native American inspired movement for my dancers. I watched instructional videos and planned to attend at least one Pow Wow before I would be too engulfed in the rehearsal process to attend. All to no avail, each time someone would refer me to a Pow Wow, either my daughter or I was too sick to attend, or it involved purchasing a plane ticket. I also ended up missing the Native American Dance presentations in honor of the opening of the *Indivisible* exhibit due to a prior commitment, so I was never able to witness a live Pow Wow. However, I was fortunate enough to view footage of a live Powwow that my costume designer Januwa Moja attended, called The Shinnecock 50th Anniversary Powwow. It was a documentary that gave me a closer vantage point of the performers. This enabled me to experience different nuances in the movement that could enhance the authenticity of my interpretation of the dance styles. I began to develop movement inspired by "Lady's Fancy Shawl Dance and Men's Fancy Dance mixed with my own African centered style of moving.

THE CAST

I knew that I would have to call in some favors in order to accomplish this huge undertaking of a production. I figured I'd go all out since I was given a budget. I wanted it to be a dramatic ballet about my mother's life. I would play my mom, and my supporting characters, the "fake" Native American women, needed to be technically sound and willing to go there dramatically. The first few rehearsals, I just spent time exploring movement, trying to decide how traditionally Native American I wanted the movement to be. I knew that I wanted Assane Konte, founder and director of Kankouran West African Dance Theater, to be my African Chief. I knew that no one else would have the charisma to pull that off, especially since I knew that my audience would be heavily comprised of the Traditional African Dance Community of Washington, D.C.

I called in the Traditional West African Dance Group "DONO" to be the African component. I knew that they were well versed in African folklore and that they would be willing to add the dramatic fervor that the piece would demand. However, having to wear shackles did not sit well with them at all. Some had nightmares, and a few of them walked out of rehearsal due to the heaviness of spirit that the shackles conjured up.

I casted "fake" Native Americans in accordance with their dancing ability of course, but they also needed to look Native American. I ended up with two Chinese women, one Korean woman, and one woman from the Philippines. All were beautiful movers who were open to learning a new movement style and committed to the storyline.

Last but not least, I cast the men. If I could have gotten away with this being an all female cast, I would have. Male dancers have been, in my experience, less reliable than female dancers because they are usually the minority in the room. As a result of this scarcity, they are allowed to get away with chronic lateness and absenteeism more frequently than women. Women are more likely to be fired and replaced during the rehearsal process than men are.

This entire process was such a nerve racking ordeal because of the men either not showing up on time, pulling out because of scheduling conflicts, or just not being able to execute the work. I ended up with David Yates, who could never pull off the majority of the movement technically, but who did a great job with the more pedestrian movement. David became my in- house company manager. He was always there to help lock up, move things, burn music, babysit my four year old and assure me that things would all work themselves out divinely. I had two other male apprentices in the room: one fierce dancer with a laundry list of scheduling conflicts, and last but not least, my husband Kwame Opare.

I drafted two drama majors from Scot Reese's Black Theater and Performance class that I took last semester, and one actor who had previously taken my West African dance class at College Park to play the white men.

But by far my biggest challenge was the Native American Dance Company. I had the hardest time trying to locate a Native American performance group that was willing to incorporate my process and storyline into their presentation. The process would have required that they rehearse with the cast and be involved in the creative process. Companies were either just not willing to do all of that, or they were ridiculously expensive. A group called NAP (Native American People) who are affiliated with the Baltimore Native American Center answered my call and showed up to rehearsal one day, after weeks of coordinating schedules. They were rough around the edges and had never performed onstage before. They were Powwow Dancers who were accustomed to just showing up to perform in the arena or on the field with hundreds of other dancers. They came to rehearsal and were blown away. They had never really rehearsed in a studio before and had never been part of a storyline such as this. When I asked if they would be a part of the Trail of Tears, they refused. They wanted nothing to do with that part of their history. They were open to a photo shoot, one other rehearsal besides the dress rehearsal and the two performances that we had verbally agreed upon. I ended up not seeing them again until the day of the dress rehearsal where I met their entire cast for the first time. They arrived two hours late! In the spirit of old school dance, I felt like I had a right to deduct their pay. I told Erin how I felt and we decided to meet with them and talk about it. The director and one dancer threatened to pull out, but the three other dancers still wanted to perform, so Erin just gave them what we had originally agreed upon and I bit the bullet. Next time, I'll get it in writing, with a lateness clause attached.

COSTUMES

I was so relieved when I was told that Tzveta Kassabova would be working on my costumes. In general, the production meetings were always met with a good deal of opposition, but I chalked it up to the fact that I had a cast of twenty-five people that needed to be outfitted in period clothing that required a costume change for almost every scene. One of the production people took me upstairs to show me some costume loan options from the theater department, since I was extremely over budget. He even offered to bring in one of his blankets from home for me to use as a prop. As we got closer to opening night, and the storyline began to fill out, I found that I needed additional costumes in order to make ends meet. Tzveta offered to sew a few items, and committee member Alvin Mayes loaned me a few pieces of clothing for the men. I was so grateful.

THE SET

Collin Ranney, the set designer, created a "white set". It consisted of white marley with white panels covered in white sheathing to add texture. Some of these panels were able to either move from stage right to left and some were able to tilt inward to create diagonals within the space. All curtains and legs were removed from the stage, leaving raw space and whiteness from the audience perspective. Collin felt that this would help the piece obtain the raw and earthy texture that would lend itself to the time period and outdoor setting.

THE CHOREOGRAPHY

Because I chose such a vast topic to translate into movement, I felt like the work needed to unveil itself in the form of a timeline. I decided to use my mother as a character reference inside of this story and follow her life up until the present. In accordance with my research, I needed the Africans to arrive in America twice: once in regalia and then as slaves stripped of everything. The Native Americans needed to reflect this as well. I also needed to research the specifics of how they traveled to America. According to Dr. Van Sertima, the early exploring boats of the Egyptians were believed to have been Papyrus Reed boats. These were the first boats out of Africa to successfully navigate the Gulf Stream currents to the America's in 2,600 B.C.¹³ Initially, I wanted the bow of a papyrus reed vessel to extend from the downstage left wing. I needed "the first coming" and "second coming" to be at the shore. Collin Ranney suggested that we make the boat come alive by creating a puppet that the dancers could manipulate. This would prevent having to have a boat occupy an entire wing and it would be easier to strike. In the end, this "puppet" turned into a carving of a Papyrus Reed boat. This cut out would be held up behind the center white movable panel, and have a flashlight reflected onto it from a few feet behind. From the audience's vantage point, it should have looked as if the boat was drifting to shore.

¹³ *They Came Before Columbus* "Papyrus Reed Boat" p 56-60.

Africans and Native Americans by Jack D. Forbes "Africans crossing the Atlantic before Columbus", p 14,15.

THE PROGRAM

For the "**First Coming**", I decided that the Africans would be pre-set on stage behind the boat panel and would physically manipulate the oars to simulate rowing themselves to shore, where the Native Americans would be ready to receive them as guests. Each Nation would be in full regalia, and follow protocol by having the "Okyeame," or assistant, speak for and present the Chiefs. The women would dance, the Chiefs would exchange gifts and then the community was welcomed to greet one another in the Native American tradition of the never-ending circle. All of the musical accompaniment in this section would consist of live African and Native American drumming and singing. And the lighting needed to be festive and earthy, that of a sunrise that could build into mid-day sun. The scene would end with the European presence being made while our festive union continued into the darkness. They could see the dancers and were directed to be a strong arrogant presence onstage. The dancers were directed to be totally oblivious to them.

For the "**Second Coming**", the scene began in a black out. The second boat, a slave ship, appeared behind the boat panel in the darkness, but this time it was placed upstage left and tilted inward to disguise the puppeteers. President Woodrow Wilson, the 28th President of the United States took office in 1912 after he beat Teddy Roosevelt and William H. Taft. His "Address to the American Indians" played in the house. (Address to the American Indians: 'The great white father now calls you his brothers,' by President Woodrow Wilson, Washington, D.C. 1913.):

There are some dark figures in the history of the white man's dealing with the Indians, and many parts of the record are stained with the greed and avarice of those who have thought only of their own profit. But it is also true that the purposes and motives of this great government and of our nation as a whole towards the red men have been wise, just, and beneficent. The remarkable progress of our Indian brothers towards civilization is proof of it and open for all to see.

During the past half-century you have seen the schoolhouse take the place of the military post on your reservations; the administration of Indian affairs has been transferred from the military to the civil arm of the government. The education and industrial training the government has given you has enabled thousands of Indian men and women to take their places in civilization alongside their white neighbors. Thousands are living in substantial farmhouses on their own separate allotments of land. Hundreds of other have won places of prominence in the Professions, and some have worked their way into the halls of congress and into places of responsibility in our state and national governments. Thirty thousand Indian children are enrolled in government, state, and mission schools. The great white father now calls you his brothers, not his children. Because you have shown in your education and in your settled ways of life staunch, manly, worthy qualities of sound character, the nation is about to give you distinguished recognition through the erection of a monument in honor of the Indian people, in the harbor of New York.¹⁴

“Separate allotments of land” is the light cue for the Europeans to enter. The time of day was dusk; the lighting was gloomy and uncomfortable. I placed a cluster of Native Americans upstage right who had already been apprehended by European settlers. The African slaves entered from stage left in shackles and were yanked and jostled by the Europeans. The same happened stage right as the Native Americans were thrust about and yanked to their feet. Two lines of captured Nations were led across center stage where their eyes meet for the first time since their unity circle. The astonishment of both having

¹⁴ http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Address_to_the_American_Indians

fallen from grace, as it were, was evident as they recognized each other and realized the life threatening challenges that they were now faced with.

The moment of recognition led to the "**Trail of Tears**" of 1838. The Dim lighting represented the decimation of a nation. The lights also supported the progression of their journey. Charles Mingus' *Meditations on Inner Peace* played in the house while the dancers made 3 crossings. There were Native Americans and African slaves making this crossing together. The first crossing felt reluctant, wrought with uncertainty and anxiety about where they were forced to relocate. The second crossing felt angrier and weathered, symbolic of being too far ahead to turn back. The dancers were directed to feel as if they were carrying someone on their back and were forced to pull them across the stage. The weight in the carriage of the body needed to be evident. We physically did this after the dress rehearsal when Gesel Mason gave notes. Having them physically carry their fellow dancer across the stage made a huge difference in the credibility of the movement. In the third and final crossing, the dancers displayed the longing for home with long gazes in the direction of where they traveled. Feelings of reluctance to move forward yet the relief of arriving were evident.

Eliza Whitmire, a former slave who was interviewed by a census worker where she lived in Oklahoma, in February 1938 recalled, that "the aged, the sick, and the young children rode in the wagons, which carried the provisions and bedding, while others went on foot. The trip was made in the dead of winter, and many died from exposure of sleet

and snow, and all who lived to make this trip, or had parents who made it, will long remember it, as a bitter memory.”¹⁵

During this period of dispersement, many African slaves braved the Trail of Tears, rather than endure the torturous life of a slave in the South.

The **Trail of Tears** section came to an end, and **The Arrival** was set into place. The Europeans in this scene were of the Catholic Church. There was a priest, and two men to assist in the assimilation process where all connections to the Native American and African past were to be given up. All who arrived were instructed to first give up any accoutrement connected to their culture, then to partake in "bread and wine". The dancers reluctantly acquiesce and then the sound of a prison "cell door" slamming shut symbolized the permanency of this new life.

The lighting changed to a very pristine "Stepford wives" feel, very light and bland, almost like a sanitarium. *Jesus Walks* by Kanye West played while the dancers set up for the first confrontation with the European enemy. The movement was West African inspired modern dance, with different variations depending on what nationality the dancers were portraying. The Native American movements were more erect while the African movements were more grounded. We ended up splitting the stage in half, with the dancers upstage right and the actors downstage-left and we were poised and ready for

¹⁵ *Black Indian Slave Narratives*, by Patrick Mingos.

W.P.A field worker James Carseloway in February 1938 interviewed Eliza Whitmire in Estella Oklahoma.

Source: Oklahoma Historical society, Indian Pioneer History Volume 97.

battle. As the Native Americans charged at the symbolic church (the European presence), we were slapped with defeat and our future warriors were apprehended. The women were left to defend themselves, and put up a good enough fight to temporarily deflect the oppressors.

The lighting shifted to a moon lit sky and the women retreated to a **Clearing in the Woods** to conjure up spirits to protect their children. These women foresee a dangerous situation, but were uncertain about how this misfortune would reveal itself. The healing circle was assembled and the spiritual work began. Spiritual clay was brewed and consecrated by God. This clay was their assurance that their children will be returned to them, but wouldn't guarantee the condition in which they would return. The healing circle unraveled into a diagonal down right special while the Francis Scott Key's *The Star-Spangled Banner* played. Our children had been drafted by the United States military and they followed the diagonal that we had created until they stood side by side with their mothers. The mothers quickly applied the spiritual clay medicine to the face, forearm and lower leg of their child. Each motioned over the head and torso of her child and then gave her last hug before they were sent off to war.

In **Soldier**, the voice of rapper Ice Cube was heard. "Mama some man is at the door. I believe that someone is turning eighteen in this household". Ice Cube was followed by *Black Steele in the Hour of Chaos*, by Public Enemy. "I got a letter from the government the other day. I opened and read it. It said they were suckers. They wanted me for their army or whatever. Picture me giving a damn – I said never. Here's a land that

never gave a damn about a brother like me.” This song played and the dancers assumed formation. They broke into a military drill and then battlefield formations were achieved spatially throughout the section. The last crossing for the dancers was a downstage left diagonal, where my "son" led a pile-up of fallen soldiers. Mentally and spiritually fallen, that is.

Esther Phillips began to sing her rendition of *Home is where the Hatred Is*, by Gil Scott- Heron and **"Junkie"** began. Inspired by the late Eleo Pomare and my Uncle Rodney Lomas, it showed the reality of what happened to so many of our young warriors. They became addicted on the battlefield only to return home as strung out strangers to their families and loved ones. It's a heavy blow for society to deal with, and a heavier blow for the addict himself, who sometimes never finds his way back home. So many die tragically, others co-exist for the rest of their time in this life cycle. It is always the most difficult for the mother to tackle. The mothers entered upstage-right and were startled and broken-hearted to see their children drug addicted and unrecognizable. The medicine that they conjured up to protect their children did bring them home, but in a condition that they could have never imagined. The dancers portraying the mothers ran to their children and were met by blank stares and restless addicted behavior. The hugs that were meant for their children evaporated into the atmosphere. Some mothers never located their children. In this scene, my son was unrecognizable. We performed a duet in which he was so strung out that he was hideous. I was extremely angry that he allowed himself to become a victim of this lifestyle, but still loved him a great deal. We began to physically

struggle and he ended up getting so violent that I had to let him go. At this point, all my character could do was pray.

In **Call to the Ancestors**, I prayed and pleaded for God to help me to heal my drug addicted child, whose spirit had been broken. I was overcome with grief and ended up on my hands and knees crying for God's help and the guidance of my ancestors and spiritual warriors. The Native Americans and Africans reappeared in their full regalia, the way that I envisioned them in my dreams. They began to assemble a healing circle and through dance, I was once again empowered. I performed a solo that incorporated different movements from Afro-Cuban Orisha dances, Ghanaian Akom dances and heartfelt movement that grounded me so that I could move forward with my faith restored and the vitality to move forward.

Zulema sang the last section entitled **American Fruit** (*American Fruit, African Roots*). The lyrics were: "We came from a distant land, our lives already planned. We came in ships from across the sea, never again home we'd see, and now we've become American fruit...with African roots". "How were we to know what this land would bring? That our blood would flow because of the color of our skin". The lyrics of this song summed up my evening. I brought everyone seamlessly together for the end because in all actuality, that is how we had evolved as a nation. Together as "Red and Black" people, we have successfully overcome one of the most unspeakable acts created by humans, the genocide of another race of people for frivolous reasons. The lighting began to build as

more dancers entered the stage. Everyone wore white to symbolize healing, spirituality and unity. I also wanted everyone in white so that the audience would focus on the myriad of skin complexions that embodied the "Red and Black" Nation. At the end, I had the Chiefs come forward and speak in their native language. I had them relay to the audience that we as people of color had been renamed and redefined to the point where we've lost sight of who we originally were. We must always remember the beginning of our existence.

RESULTS

Thursday March 4, 2010 in my eyes was still a dress rehearsal. The Native American cast members were clueless about their entrances, exits and stage placement. The crew needed a lot of rehearsal with the costume quick changes, the movement of the stage panels, manipulating the boat and where to stand back stage. We were constantly bumping into them as we hurried backstage to execute crossovers and quick changes. The lighting and sound cues were slow which left us in the dark often and at one point when the volume should have been turned down, it was completely turned off. However, the dancing was much better than it had been in the Wednesday March 3, dress rehearsal. My cast appeared to be committed emotionally and well rehearsed, which made up for many of the technical flaws.

By Friday March 5, we had a show. Kwame had straightened out certain lighting and sound cues with Erin. I rehearsed quick changes and obscurity backstage with the

crew, and was able to rehearse with our Native American guests for an hour before curtain. I also felt a little more secure about my solo even though I wished that I had gotten the opportunity to shorten it by about three minutes.

In general, American African was well received by the audience. We got a standing ovation Friday night and after the performance, there were several requests to take the piece on the road as an educational tool. The highlights of the evening were "Soldier", "Junkie" and "Trail of Tears". My parents recognized that "Junkie" was a depiction of Uncle Rodney's life. My mom remembered having to ask him to leave the apartment a few times when he became violent while he was inebriated. She said it brought back a flood of memories.

I would have liked to change the beginning of the performance. The "Traditional" Native American dance style was too mild mannered and cool tempered to kick off the evening. "Fancy dance" which is more upbeat and physically challenging would have been more appropriate, and more expensive. During this process, both dance companies told me that they charge more for "Fancy Dance" because it required more energy.

I would have also liked to create some sort of torturous event inside of the story. We did create the "Nightmare" when we performed it at the Baltimore Museum of Art. It appeared right before the "Second Coming" section. We used white spandex fabric to create a wall of horror with faces and body parts protruding from the fabric, which scared

me half to death in rehearsal. I was beaten and stripped by the Europeans, which added to the adrenaline rush for the dancers and myself. The actors were so engrossed that they ripped my costume by mistake. It was intense, one of the audience's favorite scenes.

Another memorable moment that went up a notch at the BMA was the "Call for the Ancestors" section. Assane Konte really assumed his role as chief during my prayer, holding me and rocking me as if he were the spirit of my great, grandfather, and it became very emotional for me. I was able to shorten the music for the solo also, which enabled me to concentrate more on dancing rather than the length of the solo. Having to keep the audience engaged with an annoying back injury was limiting, but I did my best.

Looking back now, although I was reenacting my mother's life inside of American African as we neared the end of the timeline, I found myself having to decide whether or not I wanted to place my own realities into the character. For instance, during "Junkie", the anger that I felt for Uncle Rodney committing suicide fueled my rage as his mother/sister inside of that section. I loved Rodney, but was angry that he couldn't stay sober. So the feelings of love mixed with anger were easy for me to access, they were real. On the other hand, in "Call to the Ancestors" I was constantly on the floor and had to make a concerted effort inside the choreography to get up! My mother is still searching, healing and struggling to move forward from the loss of her brother, but she's not "up" yet. The struggle to get up was symbolic of her healing process. Inside of that section we are

sympiotic and I enable her to rise. I represent her future. Through her I was born, through me she will be renewed.

At the BMA, we decided to begin the entire piece in Africa, for a number of reasons. First of all, I still wasn't able to afford a presentation of "Fancy Dance" by the Native Americans, and because the NAP dancers stood me up the previous day, I called Night Wolf to see if he could arrange for a group to perform on a day's notice. He came to the rescue with the Tayac dancers. They performed well and Night Wolf spoke in Native Tayac during the finale, which seemed like it went on forever. He took full advantage of his moment in the spotlight, and proceeded to name every Native American Nation that he could remember. Nevertheless, not bad for a day's notice I thought. The "fake natives" and I had rehearsed back-up choreography just in case the real Natives ever decided not to show up. Luckily, we didn't have to perform it. It was important that *American, African* contain authentic movement from both Red and Black Nations. I wanted the audience to witness both traditions in their purest movement styles before the intersections began to commence.

My second reason for starting in Africa was so that I could showcase Dishibem Performing Arts Preparatory, the teenagers that I work with throughout the year. I don't like the whole concept of dance recitals, so I try to incorporate these young artists inside of Dishibem performances whenever possible. I also wanted to display the pomp and circumstance and protocol of African society. I sometimes forget that people have no

recollection of that time in history. We did a reconstruction of "Bawa," a dance from Ghana West Africa that the Dinizulu Dancers and Drummers used to perform in the 1970's in New York City. The choreography is a different from the Guinea influenced choreography showcased in the rest of the piece and the movement style was simple enough for the dancers to learn and execute on short notice.

Because my mentor Dr. Sherrill Berryman-Johnson had passed away a few days earlier, the BMA performance was done in her honor. Her spirit was so strong in the theater that evening. At the end of the bows, when the entire cast dressed the stage in the form of a semi-circle, I envisioned generations of ancestors standing behind each cast member. I could feel the presence of content spirits, pleased that their story was told. The myriad of cultural backgrounds represented by every member of my cast was an astounding accomplishment. Each cast member was vital to the reenactment of my story. I was so overwhelmed with emotion that I had to exit the stage. The evening was such an accomplishment, yet there is still so much more work to do.

CONCLUSIONS

Looking back, I realized that I ran this rehearsal process differently from how I have run such rehearsals in the past. I was a lot more lenient when it came to tardiness and "marking" movement during a run through. This occurred primarily because rehearsals ran late into the evening and I needed to conserve energy so that I could survive the hour drive back to Baltimore and because the majority of my dancers weren't

being paid very much. They had families, jobs and school, and I needed to respect that to an extent. The consequence was a longer process in getting the cast to a final product.

This thesis has served as a pathway to endless possibilities of choreographic variations on this concept of *American African* intersections through movement. There are also many small stories within this large story that can be isolated and developed into solo or small group works. *American African* was a huge but necessary undertaking. I've never attempted to produce a work this large before. It was a risk that I needed to take in the presence of seasoned choreographers who could guide me through this challenge.

I came to graduate school so that I could be in the presence of people who had the expertise to turn failure into fabulosity! I had to stop beating myself up and comparing my work to Jawole Zollar of Urban Bush Women, Ronald K. Brown of Evidence Dance Company and Kevin Jeff of Jubilation and Deeply Rooted Dance Company, all choreographers that I have been fortunate enough to work with and whose work I respect and have used as my choreographic barometer. I came to College Park to find my voice as a choreographer and to (as Donna Uchizono called it) "Kill My (choreographic) Father". I've buried my father and I've found my voice.

NEXT STEPS

Overall, I was pleased with the work and I'm anxious to give it another shot. I do foresee another presentation of *American, African*, only this time, I'd like to be afforded

the opportunity to attend a Powwow and choose Native American dancers in accordance with their displayed ability in performance. There are so many more audiences to "edutain" and I appreciate the spiritual journey that each dancer had to commit to in order to execute this work, especially when questioning his/her stance on religion, race and patriotism.

Each of the performers has expressed their enthusiasm about another presentation of *American, African*. In the future, I'd like to have this project funded in order to present a school tour, possibly through Young Audiences of Maryland. I'd also like to present *American, African* in New York where there is a large contingency of "Red and Black" people. Lastly, I would like to present this work to an exclusive Native American audience followed by a discussion. I'm very curious about their response to the events in my timeline and I'd love to hear about their own experiences related to this timeline.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX I – Historical Timeline

1310- “The First Coming”- Abu Bakr II (King) Mansa Mohammed launched a mission to travel across the Atlantic Ocean with 200 vessels from the Gambia West Africa, equipped with Gold, Water and Provisions.

1824- “The Second Coming” – The Africans return, but this time as slaves. Many Native Americans were enslaved as well and land allotment laws were in effect. The Cherokee were in danger of having to leave their homeland.

1838- “The Trail of Tears” – The last of the Cherokee were forced to leave their homeland, and as many as 15,000 of their African slaves were taken with them.

1839- “The Arrival”– A new capital is established by the Cherokee Nation in what is now known as Oklahoma and Native Americans are forced to conform to new religion, language and culture.

1903- “Clearing in the Woods” – A premonition that danger is on the horizon. Both African and Native American women come together to perform spiritual rituals from the past in order to protect their loved ones praying that the spirit that carries them away from home brings them back safely.

1973- “Soldier” – The Vietnam War. Many African and Native Americans are called to serve their country, but what has their country done to serve them?

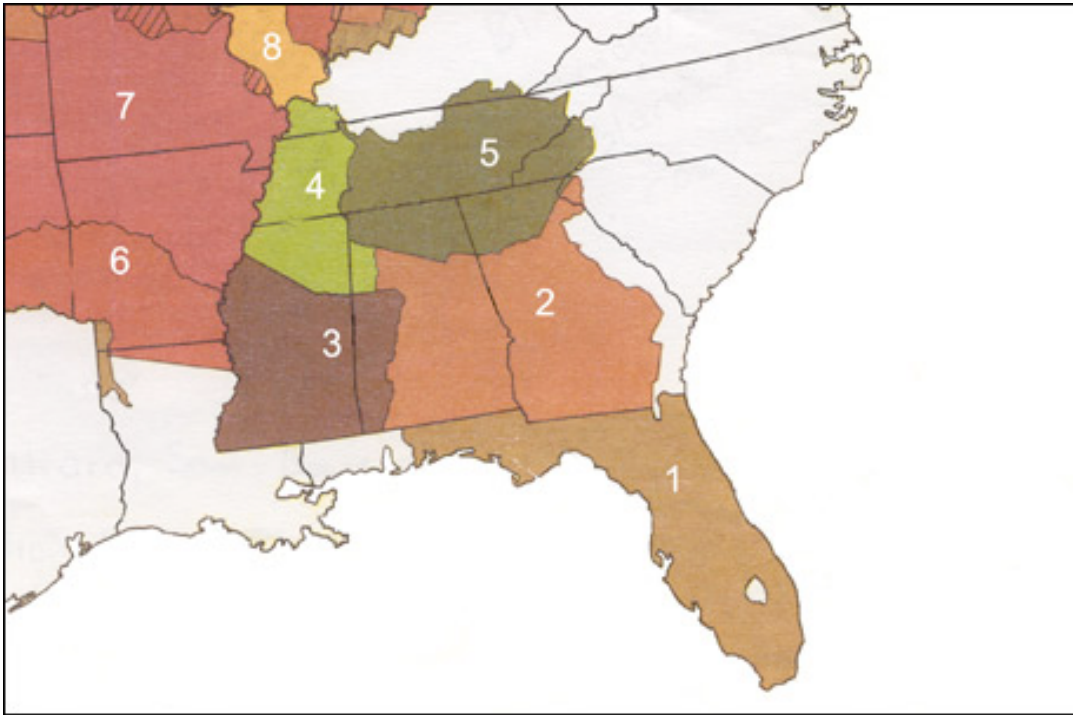
1976- “Junkie” – The Warriors return home addicted and unrecognizable.

2000- “ Call to the Ancestors”- A mothers prayer for healing.

2010- “American Fruit” – The union of mixed Native American and African heritage is recognized and celebrated.

APPENDIX II: Land occupied by Southeastern Tribes, 1820s.

(Adapted from Sam Bowers Hilliard, "Indian Land Cessions" [detail], Map Supplement 16, Annals of the Association of American Geographers, vol. 62, no. 2 [June 1972].)

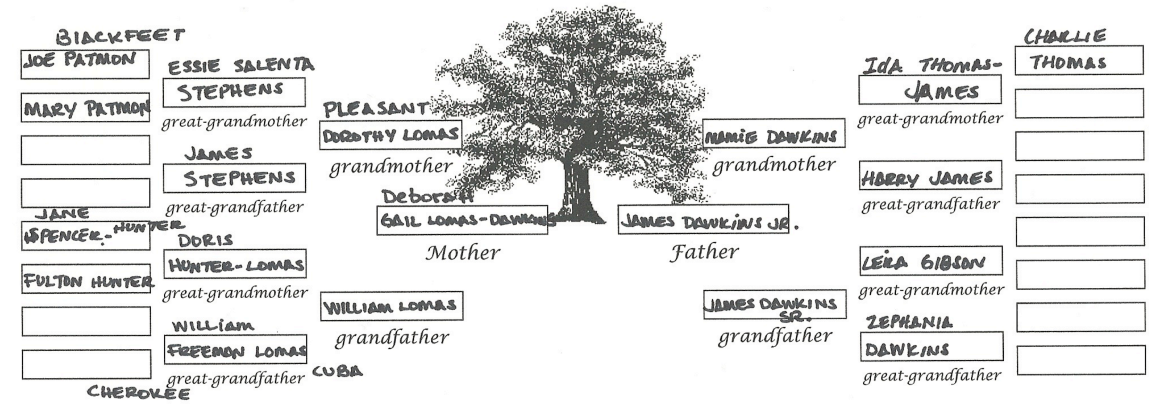


Key:

1. Seminole
2. Creek
3. Choctaw
4. Chickasaw
5. Cherokee
6. Quapaw
7. Osage
8. Illinois Confederation

APPENDIX III – Family Tree

Family Tree



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