

**UArts**  **SCHOOL  
OF DANCE**

# ΛΕΟΚΝΙΑΣ

SANKOFA: GO BACK AND GET IT, GO, FETCH, TAKE  
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS, DANCE

2020  
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE ARTS



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*The manifestation of my research is in this book of pictures, poems, journal entries, and rough artistic design plans as reflections of processes and meditations along my journey as a dance and theatre artist. My thesis meditates on perspectives of Afro-futurism, ancestral work, and body practice working together to propose transcendent actualizations of self and future worlding. I'm deeply curious about history's way of accompanying collective future thinking and becoming. The image of the Sankofa bird, in my opinion, is the ultimate image of black furtherance. The past is behind us to illuminate pathways into the advancement of future black possibilities. I was particularly interested in the philosophies of Malcolm X, Angela Davis and the Black Panther Party, James Baldwin, Medgar Evers, W.E.B. Du Bois, Tommy DeFrantz, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, and Adrienne Maree Brown, to name a few. In my research, I interviewed various dancers of unique backgrounds to discuss these topics. I asked them their education, chosen identity, and questions of their approach to their work and the world as a black-identifying person. I also studied and taught African diasporic classes and leapt into a more intimate relationship with body communication and roots practice. My work in creating and curating socio-artistic projects - collaboratively created with the intention to navigate humanity into wellness in ways that involve joy, commitment to vision, expression, and connectivity, is my contribution to black furtherance. I believe furthering society in truth, love, and responsibility is the critical work of the artist.*



# Mother-daughter team expands Flair studio

Self-discovery, self-actualization and growth... this was the beginning in 1968 for Flair Studio, where certain standards of black beauty were reinforced.

Expansion into the fashion show market came next, with an eye to fashion clarity and detail that created demand for the kind of entertainment - fashion show business, offered by the mother and daughter team of Willa and Andrea Bland.

Continuing requests for programs for younger children led the studio in 1975 to open the children's ballet center, with emphasis on traditional dancing, directed by Shawan Patterson.

By 1980 Flair expanded to Annapolis and opened a class, taught by Gwen Kellam. From a small idea several years ago,



**MOTHER-DAUGHTER TEAM** — Andrea and Willa Bland are the owner-operators of Flair Studio.

emerged into a self-improvement, dance, ballet and modeling center.

The newest project being planned by Flair

cosmetic line targeted for fall 1981.

Personal skin and make-up consultations will be provided by experienced beauty consultants and make-up



My grandmother, a black woman who naturally stood no taller than 5'4, started a modeling and dance business in 1968, in an immediate reaction to the acutely sobering death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She and her friend Lucille worked together to get the business up and running, and called it Flair Modeling Studio; and later Flair Dance & Modeling Studio - endearingly known around Maryland as *Flair*. Flair was a place for black women and men of all ages to learn social skills and develop confidence through its offerings. My mother, Andrea, and grandmother, Willia, worked close together to carry out the operations of the business. My grandmother was a strong starter and closer, and my mother was focused on protocol, execution, and keeping Flair fresh; however, if my grandmother had to do it all she would do it with grace.

The business was always busy and could easily feel overwhelming. My mother and grandmother ran it while raising my sisters, Noel, Mona, and I. Boredom and idle time were foreign concepts to us. By the time I was 6 or 7, my oldest sister Mona went off to college, and Noel started her high school dance studies and there I was there soaking in the glory of being the youngest, and sub-consciously learning how to do what my mom and grandmother were doing with Flair. I became aware of the affect Flair had on the local community and beyond. I have often overheard people talking in stores around Baltimore about their family's involvement with Flair. It was a house-hold name because my grandmother knew it was important and that's how she carried herself and the business. She convinced the masses.

While there will always be differing ideologies, black communities can still benefit from development of operational unity and examples of economic agency. Defeat and laze stifles progress in a damaging way. Whether we choose to acknowledge it or not we don't get to turn off the attached stigmata common for being black when needed or convenient. The sometimes daily negotiation of encountering racism and racial injustice is exhausting, but I wonder about worlds beyond that place of defeat and rejection. It's known that building concerted structure in black communities has made a difference in the families that belong to the Nation of Islam, the Black Panther Party, Jack and Jill, fraternities and sororities, and churches, to name those that immediately come to mind - creating a cultural empowerment-driven network. Under-resourced and overlooked groups of people gain from plans and devoted stewards of such mission-based work. The specificity and motivation behind black advancement I experienced growing up intrigues me and keeps me curious in how to navigate grass-roots Afro-futurism.

After 15 years of studying ballet, jazz, tap, African, and musical theatre at Flair and other schools, and 10 years teaching around Baltimore and getting a BA in theatre, I began to co-manage the studio with my mother, and helped fill in the gaps as my grandmother was getting older and becoming less mobile. Three years after my grandmother's death, my mother now enjoying retirement, and my sister Noel in charge of the business, I've shifted my work in Afro-futurism towards theatre making, and artistic curating which allows me to connect to people with integrity, creativity, and unique meaningfulness - paying respect to my education and the dreams and prayers of my ancestors. And so it is.

# THE BODY HAS A WORD

Hips sway  
and say  
and sing  
and bring fortunes untold  
From futures, from old  
The body is the storyteller  
The body has a word  
Shoulders shake  
And tremble  
And massage the heart space  
Strength is their structure  
Bearing the weight  
Bearing the tide  
While hips move gracefully  
Far and wide  
Never stiff  
And if the head will circulate within  
rotation  
It's territory allows meditation  
Gestation  
Divination  
At the highest height of the body  
Floating securely  
The body has a word  
Presence transcends conscience  
Yet are one, uniquely  
Constancy founded in knowing and being  
Unknowing and becoming  
The future is of the post world  
And now  
Body as carrier  
Containment and spillover of things felt and  
things sought  
The body has a word



# TREE OF LIFE

*I favor a tree's classic form and timeless charm  
Amazed at it's constitution of the living and of the lived on  
Fed from her roots to the top of her crown  
She sees over, above, and far beyond  
She's not nearly a home but also a place for calm and rest  
Finds food in what's good, sage wisdom at best  
A tree's life came into existence many decades ago  
Enduring calamitous storms, and freezing cold snow  
Bearing sweet fruit, foliage, insisting support and natural flow  
Permanence where rooted, confidence, pride  
A radiating glow  
She stands tall though may be smaller in size  
The strongest of the strong in the fight to survive  
A tree lives on  
In its memories, provisions and in spirit it thrives  
In its memories, provisions and in spirit it thrives*

Take it all back  
The Orishas, the ancestors, the unborn  
Bear knowledge, and truths of truth  
The Odu, how we know to know  
Who we are  
Our origins, and what's in the coming  
The written text, a gift sufficient  
But we accept with voids.

Seek to know  
And ye shall find  
Seek to eat  
And ye shall be fed  
Seek to be coddled  
Beware of over-comfort  
In the effort  
Thyself, seek thyself  
Voids avoided or better informed.

Ask, read, think, breathe, bring, bear  
Meditate, confiscate, take it all back  
An offering may just be that  
It will be blessed  
It will be blessed  
Take it all back  
It may just be that  
It will be blessed  
It will be blessed

**KNOW  
THYSELF**





# MALCOLM



# SOCIAL DANCING

Are you not dancing  
Moving through space  
Curious, maybe furious, delirious even  
Have you fallen from grace  
Have you risen  
Will you rise  
Dance in choice  
For that rejoice  
Stand dammit stand  
Up and move  
Demand your dance  
Demand your voice  
As one we dance  
In love, in fear, in wonder  
In decadence, beyond the constructs  
Beyond the fence  
Breaking down barriers  
Dissension warriors  
The body knows what's refuted in theory  
The body's practice of dance naturally, brutally  
The choice is in the body  
It will choose the muse  
By default  
Do you mean to dance  
Though there's always the dance  
Into, of, for, about, because, with and without  
Are you not dancing

# THE THINGS WE DID FOR SURVIVAL

Walked 10 miles to school

Colored water fountains  
& colored pools

Pseudonyms like Dunn  
First name Kat

Yes massa this  
No sah, massa that

Cotton-picked till callouses appeared

Whips, welts, scars, as if seared

Passed in earnest for good ole lily white

If hair was smooth and skin light bright

Rape, dogged, killed by massa

Shuffled along with big bug eyes & laughter

Traditional religion-forbidden  
Proselytization full of sin and

Read to, fed, and bathed little white children

Fought the wars of a hyper capitalistic nation

Drug-sicken and time was wastin'

Just our luck, lured in, cashed in on

Fucked up.



*Lately, I've been quite fascinated with reading slave narratives. Most of them horrific and difficult to imagine. As with my approach to theatre, I am inclined to attempt to put myself in others' shoes. As with the slave narratives, I tried to put myself in the shoes of my own great-great-grandparents who were slaves and sharecroppers, alike. I know life for them was more perilous than I'll ever fully comprehend in one lifetime of curiosity and research. It's easy to distance ourselves from traumatic events geographically far from our local neighborhood and even easier to be distanced from the histories of people and communities that are not immediately related. Immediacy almost always has a better chance of urgent response.*

*Now, and always now, I'm actively seeking self-truth - my own black-knowing. Black-knowing and the feeling of tribal responsibility has afforded me a positive heightened awareness of myself and my lineage of parents. My practice of ancestral research and prayer and time spent in creative projects has brought about empathy for other comprehensive selves. This world is ours. If we care to change it our diligence in care towards others has the power to illumine and orient ourselves towards our newer and better worlds. I pray for our unified intention of blending, respect for others, and future visualizations.*



Right now I'm in a state of conflict.  
Chakras. Health. Finances. Responsibility. Security.  
Independence. Freedom. Peace of mind.  
Empowerment. Voice. Compromised. Education.  
I'm tired. What have I been hearing?  
Be responsible. Be still. Be silly. Be honest.  
Be healed. Some people you gon have to  
let go. They can't go with you. For  
some reason they're trying, actively,  
trying to secure you. Run out of  
here. I'm out. dead weight, man. & may  
they be blessed. I'm blessed to have  
free access to all classes at mvmc lab.  
I've just lately been hearing holistic  
healing. Chakra cleansing. My relationship  
with mvmc lab is ~~the~~ part of  
the answer. Alignment provided. I blessed  
my future self taking on employment  
there. Again, alignment. And again  
let go of the dead weight. Look how  
far you've come from where you  
came from. Go after exactly what you  
want. You're in for such a beautiful  
ride. Believe. Look at where you're going.  
Go in. Just begin.



So  
what is  
the main concept behind  
Afro-futurism? How does it get done or  
attended to? Is there a need for it? Who is thinking  
about it? Are we “afroing” the future just by living while black?  
Is it a matter of conscious-thinking-it into existence? Why  
is it a thing to me? Is it superficial? I’ve either been asked  
or contemplated these questions and ideas. Could it be an  
iteration or an extension of my life growing up around a strong,  
structured, innovative, and powerful female presence - my  
mother and grandmother? No two people have had more of an  
influence on my life, and I think that fascinates me. I’ve learned  
in trying to understand and untangle myself that I have to go  
through the two of them. They are the gateway. As a child, I  
was always very busy running around with my mother and  
grandmother as they managed business. Always underneath  
them or trailing behind. Sometimes school was secondary,  
well, at least my mental capacity for it. My education on  
life and artistic skills were happening constantly at home  
and at Flair. The two were really synonymous. Somewhere  
in the living of shadowing, I absorbed, and maybe even  
assimilated to an intentionally Afro-futuristic environment  
before the term was coined or I had any say-so. But one  
thing I strongly believe in is that it’s the critical work of  
developing communities of people whose histories have  
been botched and often ignored to serve the unjust system  
this country was built upon and defends, in an effort to  
acknowledge their humanness and belonging in humanity.



*My journals are many times  
notes to self. I seek to know truth  
in life. I can't help myself. It's not too  
bad of a gnawing because in truth there  
is always a healthy amount of freedom. In  
writing in journal/introspective form I tend to  
get clear and almost clairvoyant (it can feel like). My  
mom has always claimed she had a type of psychic chan-  
neling power. Though she doesn't do it much anymore, she  
could tell you the month you were born, your astro-  
logical sign, and other little secrets you thought no  
one would ever know. I've picked up a similar  
energy and have fun playing those same  
psychic guessing games. I wonder. Is it  
intuitive attunement or something  
indeed psychic.*

**“One never knows,  
do one?”**

**FATS WALLER, AIN'T MISBEHAVIN'**



All the questions. Too much thinking.  
Just do it. Be bold enough. Say yes &  
move forward w/ abundance. Am I  
obsessed w/ progress? Am I confused  
about the difference between progress  
& movement. Constantly conflicted.  
Truth is nothing is stopping me but me.  
I'm making the choices to produce  
some desired outcome. What's the  
outcome I see for myself? Am I  
able to see beyond the environment?  
my comforts? When ~~is~~ is it ok to just  
not —? Want more. Be more. Do  
more. Maybe I'm projecting onto my  
future self. & I mean that's the  
whole idea. actually, isn't it? I say  
work out the previous questions  
but priority is to get clear. It's  
dangerous being unclear. It's  
dangerous being confused. Indecisiveness  
do confusion wastes time. How  
much more time do you have  
to waste? And remember what  
you know about process. Practice  
makes progress.



So it would seem natural that I imagine Afro-futurism as a structure of living which gives intensive attention to a critical need for black community furtherance, especially in under-resourced neighborhoods. I do think it's happening more virtually than in our material, unsaturated-by-the-internet world. It's really grass-roots work. I'm extremely curious about the strategic ideas and philosophies that Civil Rights Era activists and politicians had and how they've materialized or have lain dormant. The intersection of black culture and technology emphasizes the incorporation of elements of black history and culture-there's an other-worldness about Afro-futurism that can be more intentionally imagined. This is what I'm getting after. I'm getting after black-knowing as a collective, intentional awareness of future-making different than, and an upgrade from the current state of it. Afro-futurism exists with regard to the history of the black identifying person, with pride and unity as a source of spiritual and mental healing.

How do you view blackness? Do you appreciate it? Do you have a general idea of black history that satisfies you? Do you want to know more? Why or why not? How do you imagine blackness in life's onwardness? We can't ignore ourselves in meditation and support of black-living.





### BLACK CHILD'S PLEDGE

1. I pledge allegiance to my Black People.
2. I pledge to develop my mind and body to the greatest extent possible.
3. I will learn all that I can in order to give my best to my People in their struggle for liberation.
4. I will keep myself physically fit, building a strong body free from drugs and other substances which weaken me and make me less capable of protecting myself, my family and my Black brothers and sisters.
5. I will unselfishly share my knowledge and understanding with them in order to bring about change more quickly.
6. I will discipline myself to direct my energies thoughtfully and constructively rather than wasting them in idle hatred.
7. I will train myself never to hurt or allow others to harm my Black brothers and sisters for I recognize that we need every Black Man, Woman, and Child to be physically, mentally and psychologically strong.
8. These principles I pledge to practice daily and to teach them to others in order to unite my People.

The Black Panther, October 26, 1968 by Shirley Williams

"The Black Child's Pledge", HERB: Resources for Teachers, accessed August 1, 2020, <https://herb.ashp.cuny.edu/items/show/1254>.



Planning for play direction  
Pipeline, by Dominique Morisseau  
Morgan State University, 2020

Pipeline  
Dominique Morisseau

Sorry Mrs. Jackson  
All Eyes on me

undefined space, NYC  
so-called urban  
stressed environment  
today

Alternate reality bleeding into reality  
Isolated reality  
only words

juxtaposition

Identity (private school / ~~not~~ so-called urban en.)

downway

Sound

1. School

2. Dorms, m.m. rock

Bare/ <sup>minimal</sup> provisions vs. Basic Needs

What does it mean to be a younger Black man?

Control / Response / Reactive

Societal / Atmospheric control

Injustice / Response

↓  
Adopt A Split  
personality /

WEB DuBois

Double Consciousness

Criminalize / medicalize

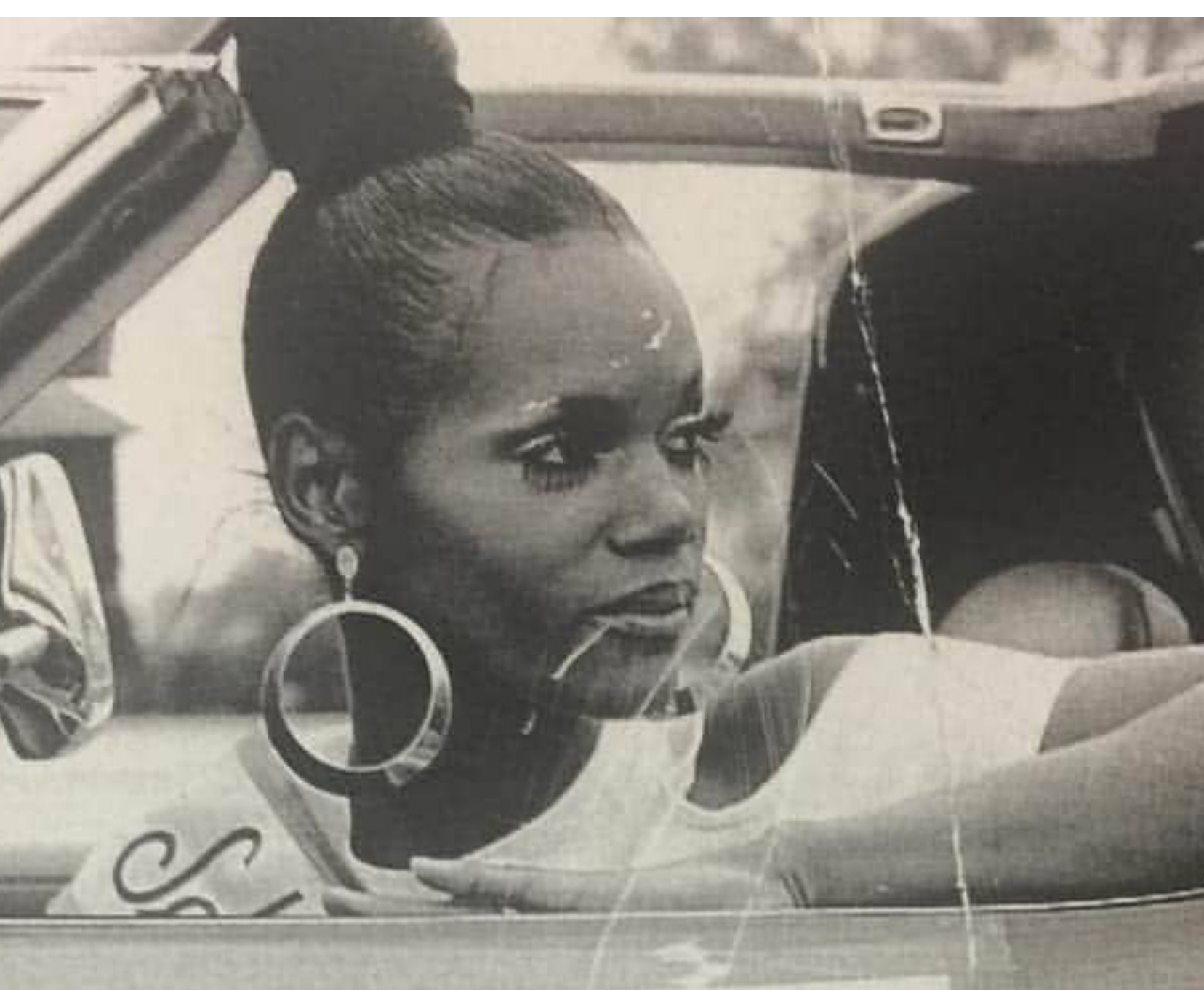
monotonous, bleak, uninspiring, unmanicured,  
Elusive, under-resourced

School to Prison

- Emphasis on testing as the primary learning measuring stick
- early tracking of students into various economic sectors directing > prison
- primarily in public schools

see identities  
as an exhausting  
"rattling"





The Auxiliary of  
**PROVIDENT HOSPITAL**

PROUDLY PRESENTS

A FASHION SHOW  
**EXTRAVAGANZA**

Sankofa:  
Black Body Healing and Future  
Living with Insights from Black  
Dance Makers and Practitioners

an excerpt

By: Mari Andrea Travis  
February 2020



“I got, I got, I got, I got  
Loyalty, got royalty  
Inside my DNA  
Cocaine quarter piece, got war and peace  
Inside my DNA  
I got power, poison, pain and joy  
Inside my DNA  
I got hustle, though, ambition, flow  
Inside my DNA”

The approach to dance practice, creation, pedagogy, and performance can be synonymous concepts used in exploring human expression – manifesting agency in the doing/learning and undoing/unlearning. Approaches to dance facilitation can propose suggestions in the becoming of a new collective relinquishing of the racially-burdened black psychology as a result of a difficult, tormentous past. In experiencing dance, the practitioner learns, through persistence, that commitment must be intentional, bold, courageous, and approached with patience. These characteristics of necessary exercise and practice help in providing a feeling of success. It takes a certain strength in one’s autonomy-a learning of self to become, intentionally. A dancer makes her mind up that she’s going to do the challenging step until it becomes less challenging. In repetition, and structured focus, the power of the mind is doing its best work. In the steps towards progress, an awareness of self becomes rapidly conscious to the dancer, starting with first steps. For the black dancer, this is also true; however, the trouble in feeling welcome and equal in training and performance spaces is double often. Though within the last 10 years or so “inclusion” has been a buzz word regarding a solution to the problem with race in institutions. The black dancer stares down their own integrity and holds themselves accountable because they must to survive and thrive in their space of the moment.

Lucille Clifton’s, “The Earth is a Living Thing,” asserts a stance on blackness that aligns with the argument of black as strong, beautiful, powerful, and alive:

The Earth is a Living Thing  
  
Is a black shambling bear  
ruffling its wild back and tossing  
mountains into the sea  
is a black hawk circling  
the burying ground circling the bones  
picked clean and discarded  
is a fish black blind in the belly of water  
is a diamond blind in the black belly of coal  
is a black and living thing is a favorite child  
of the universe  
feel her rolling her hand  
in its kinky hair  
feel her brushing it clean

The black community must put black dynamism and excellence at their mental forefronts and consciously define it for self in order to face; not avoid, not disassociate, but face and embrace inherited tools for aliveness, living and surviving. Embracing black dynamism and interrogating the history of black people as is taught in general academic systems are key precepts in achieving self-transcendence. Dancer, teacher and choreographer Gary Jeter, when thinking about principle themes in his work, finds himself most drawn to the theme of love. He immediately associates love with self-love, companionship, love for children, family, a culture, faith, and cause. He finds it more intriguing, the process of all of the aforementioned associations and perspectives. What is the state of your love toward black people? Love has a long history of impacting change. How communities view love shifts the community atmosphere and vision for itself.

When individuals in a community hold themselves accountable for their presence and contributions in and around their community and accountable to their neighbor, a love and care are buffering the edges, the moral damage of past societal negligence and strain. These ideas of accountability and social improvement may appear so but are not fantastical. Writer, social justice facilitator, healer and doula, Adrienne Maree Brown's book *Emergent Strategy* is a brave and quirky book of streamlined community-based practices and strategies that acknowledge the hard questions of social development and communal living. *Emergent Strategy* is defined in small bits throughout the book. Following self-assessment of theories introduced in a previous section, Brown defines it in another extract, "emergent strategy is about shifting the way we see the world and each other. If we begin to understand ourselves as practice grounds for transformation, we can transform the world."

What can black people do to raise awareness for the importance of black self-knowledge, which journeys to self love? In the community I grew up in and those like it, blackness is understood and historically proven as secondary in the white supremacist power structure of this country. How one thinks of themselves is reflected in how one views their reality and role in society. If this is true, consider questioning the source and imprinted model. In *The Image of the Black in Western Art*, Volume 4, Hugh Honour, editor, writes that "art images and concepts were never wholly positive [for black people], however. Black "submission" was always implicit – just taken for granted – if not, indeed, made quite explicit. Thus it was the abolitionist emblem, that most well-intentioned and commendatory of all black images, which came to crystallize and enshrine the idea of pathetic, docile, subservience and black inferiority. The emblem was explicitly described by Erasmus Darwin as the poor fetter'd SLAVE on bended knee from Britain's sons imploring to be free."

“

Ronald K. Brown, founder and artistic director of Evidence Dance Company, talks about his medley dance work *The Call* which he set on Ailey's company as a, “calling [to] all ancestors and Ailey to join in the space.” He further details the spirit in *The Call* as a prayer of the dancers asking ancestors to “please come and fill me up so we can do what you intend”... when we get the call, obey the call, and do what's next.” That is the role to be diligently assumed, in art-making; art-making as another way to say life-imagining and actualizing. In fact, the idea of non-linear time, in relation to Afro-futurism, is claiming the construct of time in one's own decided way, honoring cultural concepts and histories, but with the future and future-making at heart and in mind, intently. Losing the domination mentality of time over one's life releases a person of psychological limitations in how one views their own personal existence based on time as well as community and groups to which they identify.

”

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“Progressive art can assist people to learn not only about the objective forces at work in the society in which they live, but also about the intensely social character of their interior lives. Ultimately, it can propel people toward social emancipation.”

Angela Davis, *A People's Culture*

“Ignorance of each other is what has made unity impossible in the past. Therefore we need enlightenment. We need more light about each other. Light creates understanding, understanding creates love, love creates patience, and patience creates unity. Once we have more knowledge (light) about each other, we will stop condemning each other and a United front will be brought about.”

Malcolm X, *Malcolm X: The Man and His Times*

“Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

James Baldwin

I am curious about our general resilience as social justice actors in a traumatizing world, and as collectives of people shaping the next phase of human evolution.

Adrienne Maree Brown, *Emergent Strategy*

### Image 1

Author headshot. Photographer: Lavan Anderson. August 1, 2015

### Image 2

Andrea Travis (Left) and Willia Bland (Right), parents of author in newspaper article. Photographer and source unknown. Baltimore, circa 1980.

### Image 3

Gino Travis, father and family of author, and nuclear family members. Photographer, unknown. Source: Travis family. Circa 1959.

### Image 4

“Free Breakfast in Baltimore” - Image of a chapter of the Baltimore Black Panther Party serving breakfast, 1968. Photographer unknown. Source: <http://blackpantherparty.blogspot.com/p/community-contributions.html>.

### Image 5

Andrea Travis, mother of author, in a parade as a pageant queen. Photographer and source: unknown. Baltimore, circa 1971.

