CHAPTER III

BLACKNESS, AFRICANESS, AND DIASPORIC ORIENTATIONS

A Note from the Researcher: Throughout this dissertation I, as the researcher, will insert artistic written passages in italics in the form of preludes and interludes that reveal my perspectives on lived experiences related to the subject matter presented in the chapter. The objective is to transparently unveil for myself and others where I sit in these spaces philosophically. This positionality will also inform how I write about others and their worlds. I hope to put my positionality out in the open—my orientations. I also hope to bridge some of the gap between my artistry and my scholarship by bringing these two rigorous worlds together in my writing.

Unveiling my Location: An Artistic Prelude by Lela Aisha Jones

We, those black/African descendants with ancestors who made it through the

transatlantic enslavement period, live with our bodies that are full of memories and lived

experience of diasporas. These diasporic bodies are blended, mixed, and merged. They

are rebuilt bodies. These bodies have had a breadth of experience and have made choices

about the depth they will tackle. They are the bodies that traverse, multiply, and sense

deeply. They are the bodies that know because of time done...time sitting...time

moving...time flying by...time resting...time going hard...time building the body: the

muscles, the cells, the blood that remembers. They are not the bodies that just come to

know through some magical moment. They are the bodies of talent and the bodies of

work. These bodies tell stories of intersecting diasporas. We are witnesses, as they move,

birthing something or someone new.

I am one of those bodies. We are the bodies and the blood that has traveled the

geography of our own skins and cells and then traveled the landscapes of nations,

countries, and continents. It is the body that has broken the boundaries and reimagined itself as earth…a place to make and remake—a place to re-identify because it can't go back. The lines have been cut, but the fluidity of the body is seamlessly flowing through several countries and five body languages in a matter of minutes to produce its boundless efforts in coming together. It is the body that flows infinitely—crossing familiar and nomadic terrain.

This chapter lays down the foundation for how I, as the researcher, have experienced identity at various points in my life. It also unveils those influential interactions with peoples and communities that sent me on shifting trajectories in my perspectives on blackness—those self-identified internally and those which have been socially identified by others externally. My objective in this chapter is to transparently define and trace the descriptors for identity as I create a context for the world of research in which I and the dissertation research participant teachers and/or artists live. Developing theoretical foundations for how the research participants find their identity in their lived histories in the U.S. and other countries is crucial to the forming of their philosophies in their work as dance professionals. As the researcher, I am a participant in the community in which I have researched and it is important that I be transparent to the reader concerning my experiences in this field of study. A combination of contemplative honesty about where my identity orientations originate and where the research participants ground their identity development will create a comprehensive narrative illuminating the orientations of all parties.

70

black, blackness: An Identity and a Way of Life

Baraka Sele, Assistant Vice President of Programing at New Jersey Performing Arts Center (NJPAC) and Curator/Producer of NJPAC's Alternate Routes series, discussed identity in a session for the Innovative Cultural Advocacy Fellowship created and facilitated by the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute directed by Marta Morena Vega. Sele is a 30-year veteran of arts curation, consultation, and cultural production. According to Sele, we, as human beings in a social and relational world, have the right to name our own identities; we are who we say we are. Sele advocates that we develop identity language from our own perspectives and in a way that embraces our unique complexities. In doing so, we can catalyze more equitable conversations in scholarship, as well as in arts making, presenting, funding, and curating (Sele).

Sele further stated that even though identity language never tells the whole story, it does, however, establish a foundation from which to begin a conversation and can be crucial to the transformation potential within a dialogue focused on race and culture. There is a need to make visible how individuals and communities in a society have identified in the past, how they will work through the current state of identity dialogue, and how identity descriptions may transform their conversations in the future. Sele concludes by affirming that searching for and accepting the complexities of identity-making helps us remain whole people in the presence of others. Therefore, creating space and making time to fully articulate and hear each other's identity nuances entails a choreographic process that is well worth dancing through. However, at times, it may be

71

that one is sitting in the unrestful discomfort of identity ambiguity. In the following sections of this chapter, I discuss how this ambiguity can be determined by the ways in which identity labels are applied to a group of people and then may change over time according to differing geographical, social, and political contexts.

In this dissertation, identity transformations and multiple layers of labels play an important role in how the philosophies and practices of dance teaching/performance/ choreographic artists developed in relation to traversing black/African diasporic dances. The multiple identities under which I live daily – black of African descent, woman, southerner, teacher, movement artist, mother, daughter, sister, partner, organizer, to name a few – are intertwined within a racial and cultural history of pride and pain, home and displacement, oppression and power. As a member of this community, the ways in which my life as the researcher have informed my identity are important to the work of this dissertation.

In my hometown of Tallahassee, Florida, the term "black" was used often by my immediate family and community to create shared racial orientation, cultural traditions, and historical markers. I have chosen the word "black" as a racial and cultural identifier because, for me, it references the racial and cultural language I heard growing up, specifically in terms of how it named my family's way of life. Much of my family and community cultural practices were identified to me as black by the people closest to me, and these traditions are still a vibrant and visible reality today. "Afro" and "African American" were considered more formal or public terms in the communities where I was

reared. Afro is also a prefix used commonly and acknowledged throughout the black/African Diaspora particularly in South America and the Caribbean Islands (e.g. "Afro Cuban," "Afro Brasilian," "Afro Mexican," "Afro Puerto Rican" etc.). As a black woman, I do have sensibilities as to why these more specific terms Afro American and African American are perceived as more formal in my experience in the United States. Although these terms are used by people of African descent, they can still be perceived as imposed on black people (by professors, politicians, and those who might be seen as elite), rather than emerging from the communities they are meant to describe. It is a challenging feat to name someone or a group of people without their input and then expect those identity formations to feel like home—to be adapted and indoctrinated as their placed identity. In the following, I discuss how this placed identity might be disturbed.

Blackness is heavy, hurtful, hopeful and, at times, hopeless. Simultaneously, blackness is a site of experience, dialogue, and possibilities for identities beyond what has already been constructed, making black also a place of joy, power, depth, faith, and fertile ground for developing a strong cultural identity that is intertwined inherently with race but not defined by it. Consequently, the term black is of value although it does not begin to capture the essence of all people of African descent, not even their physical skin color, as that color is multi-hued as well. Still, bringing to the forefront that black is a color helps unveil the layers of complexity associated with the term. Further, I have chosen to lowercase "b" in the word black to denote that black is indeed a color, while

73

reared. Afro is also a prefix used commonly and acknowledged throughout the black/African Diaspora particularly in South America and the Caribbean Islands (e.g. "Afro Cuban," "Afro Brasilian," "Afro Mexican," "Afro Puerto Rican" etc.). As a black woman, I do have sensibilities as to why these more specific terms Afro American and African American are perceived as more formal in my experience in the United States. Although these terms are used by people of African descent, they can still be perceived as imposed on black people (by professors, politicians, and those who might be seen as elite), rather than emerging from the communities they are meant to describe. It is a challenging feat to name someone or a group of people without their input and then expect those identity formations to feel like home—to be adapted and indoctrinated as their placed identity. In the following, I discuss how this placed identity might be disturbed.

Blackness is heavy, hurtful, hopeful and, at times, hopeless. Simultaneously, blackness is a site of experience, dialogue, and possibilities for identities beyond what has already been constructed, making black also a place of joy, power, depth, faith, and fertile ground for developing a strong cultural identity that is intertwined inherently with race but not defined by it. Consequently, the term black is of value although it does not begin to capture the essence of all people of African descent, not even their physical skin color, as that color is multi-hued as well. Still, bringing to the forefront that black is a color helps unveil the layers of complexity associated with the term. Further, I have chosen to lowercase "b" in the word black to denote that black is indeed a color, while

73

1900s, black peoples, Africans and/or African Americans, were forced to live under the names placed upon them by Europeans, with some of those framings still very present today. With the rise of the Black Power Movement in the 1960s, and Pan-Africanism, Afrocentricity, and the adoption of African-centered life practices in the 1970s, black U.S. peoples and/or African Americans began to explore ways to take ownership over what they were called. Molefi K. Asante, a leading, profound, and legendary scholar on Afrocentric philosophy, professed in an interview with Diana Turner that for him black people faced a cultural problem (Turner 717). This problem was the version of black peoples (internally and externally) as spectators instead of agents in the world—the idea that black people in the U.S. had no socio-cultural center or no set of values from which to move through the world. He stated:

> it was while I was a student in my Ph.D. program at UCLA that I first heard Maulana Karenga talk about culture and the fact that the African American people suffered from a cultural crisis. It rang true to me from my own experiences; I was in crisis myself. It was not even economics or anything else. It was a cultural problem, and until we were able to resolve our cultural issues of who we were, we would not be able to deal with economics or technology or anything else. This made sense to me. Karenga's notion of Kawaida was so significant that I began, even as a student of communication, to try to turn my discussions and my analysis of communication theory toward the cultural issue. Out of that, I was able to arrive at the belief that our problem was that we had been dislocated by the European imagination. Europe had, in a sense, taken us out of our own position and away from our own subject place, which is our own center; we were no longer agents. We were only on the periphery of Europe. We could only become sane if we understood that we were agents in the world-not spectators, but participants in history, and actors in history. (Turner 717)

Therefore, according to Asante, becoming agents in their own identity labeling, even if these labels shifted over time and varied within differing groups, brought a sense of pride

75

to black people and inspired political efforts to create equality for black people. Self-naming reflected a shared experience and an increasing shared investment in black approaches to life that were not currently valued inside the existing cultural framework in the United States. In this section, I discuss how cultural labels shifted when emerging from differing political movements and philosophical explorations over time.

The label "black" has a deep history of racist and oppressive stereotypes, and it took on particular meanings during the 1960s and 70s — with both positive and negative connotations — that were associated with the Black Power Movement. Although the Black Power Movement was experienced as positive for many, it was also deemed by some, both black and white, to be a separatist, militant, and even an extremist movement. It followed then that a black person in the U.S. who claimed "blackness" may also be seen as someone who was going against U.S. nationalism (i.e. anti-American), or who hated white people. "Black Power," thus, conjured both fear and pride during the rise of the Black Panther Party.

While the movement did have tendencies for distancing black communities from their white communities, the Black Power Movement also created organizational structures that fought for equality for black people and sustainability of black life in the United States. The Black Panthers were also well known for their active and vigorous pursuit of Civil Rights. In other words, when black people were attacked for being black by white authority structures, the Panthers were generally ready to defend themselves by fighting no matter what violence was brought to them. The Panthers were armed with

knowledge of U.S. Civil Rights law, and physical weapons if necessary, thus protecting themselves and others from various forms of racial violence, both physical and emotional. These protective tactics garnered multiple strategic responses, such as physical standoffs or pride campaigns (The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution). Therefore, having the power to name oneself was important to those orienting as a group of people living under similar codified values; it allowed them to strengthen their chance for "a place at the table" in the U.S. power structure (Martin 85). Kwame Ture (formally known as Stokely Carmichael, leader of the Black Panthers) and Charles V. Hamilton (Civil Rights leader, political scientist) are quoted in the text "Black Power: The Politics of Liberation," that "only after group mobilization and assertion could...[black people]...as a group attain their rightful share" of power (Martin 85). Later in the 1970s, this assertion of sharing in the power can be seen in the emergence of phrases like "black is beautiful," which appeared to then establish blackness as a positive feature (Martin 91).

Today, U.S. citizens of African descent continue to search for a name that encompasses their identities. In 1988, Jesse Jackson, a prominent Civil Rights activist, Baptist minister, and politician, named black people in the U.S. *African Americans,* with hopes of unifying them, and as a means for utilizing and promoting his political platform by encouraging African Americans to rally around their shared interests. This was an intentional shift away from the term *black* as a description of black people, just as *black* was a rejection of *negro* as a descriptor in the late 1960s (Martin 93). Negro, according to Ben L. Martin's article titled "From Negro to African America: The Power of Names and

Naming," was commonly accepted in the early 1900s in the U.S., with origins that go as far back as the 1400s. Further, in the late 1800s, colored was used commonly in the U.S. vernacular. Therefore, with all these shifts in identifying labels over time in U.S. history, it is no wonder that *African American,* as an identifying term, also has its struggles as a stable identifier. Some people feel African is stressed over American while others believe the term may mute differences and variances in the racial ethnic lineages of people of African descent living in the United States. Some important examples of these variances in lineage include people from the Caribbean Islands who may prefer terms like "Caribbean" and/or "Bejan American," or folks from the continent of Africa who may prefer "Guinean American" or solely "Guinean" (Martin 92). Even with all these struggles to find an inclusive term, the descriptor "African American" seems to be holding ground currently as it is included in the census as an identifier, used to describe college departments such as African American Studies, and employed as a title to many current institutions, such as the newly opened National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington D.C.

However, there is also a continued use of *black* as a racial and cultural identifier, a use that is currently almost synonymous with the term African American. This synonymous use is particularly relevant in this present time of the Black Lives Matter movement, a movement directly connected to the unarmed killings of black people in the U.S. by law enforcement agents. This resurgence in civil and human rights activism has been garnering massive media attention since the killing of Trayvon Martin by George

78

Zimmerman in 2012. Therefore, definitions of black and blackness in a name or in the

process of naming will continue on a very complex journey, one filled with detours, road

hazards, and unknown possibilities. The journey of naming in this case creates a

wonderful metaphor for how blackness is multiple, diverse, exciting, and fraught with

differing insights, making it impossible to be simply defined through a few markers of

cultural understanding. As new political and social issues arise through the ever-present

force of racism, new needs for identifying as black, within blackness, or culturally black

also arise in the effort to secure the civil and human rights of black people in the United

States. These needs become particularly important when the laws and protections claimed

for all clearly do not apply in the same way for U.S. black peoples and communities.

blackness, Morality, and United States Law

From the information presented in previous sections of this chapter, it is clear that

no one word has ever fully described the person of African descent in the United States.

Many black people will most likely continue to feel they are both within and beyond

blackness. Even W.E.B. Du Bois, writing in the 1900s, thought "blackness" needed to

shift into a "cultural and historical term" and away from a "scientific or moral one" (Blau

and Brown 229). In other words, Du Bois felt that blackness needed to move from its use

as a judgmental and demeaning term to one of cultural pride and historical significance.

Today, U.S. society is still struggling with Du Bois' concerns. Current incidents in the

U.S. sparked by racial undertones signify that it is still valid to treat black people as if

they are not deserving of the rights and protections of the law afforded to every U.S.

citizen. By continuing to assign a negative moral value to blackness as an indictment of one's moral character, rather than as a celebration of Du Bois's notion of cultural pride, U.S. law institutions and policies will continue to indict black human beings as morally deficient. To support this claim, I introduce Michelle Alexander's 2014 text, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness,* and filmmaker Ava DuVernay's 2016 documentary, *13th,* both of which do a comprehensive job presenting the detrimental imbalance in the way that black peoples are treated by our U.S. law-making, law enforcement, and judicial systems. Alexander and DuVernay thus make visible the way morality labels are still used to create an intentional and pernicious, yet incredibly subversive, transformation of the slave trade into Jim Crow era policies, exhibited by the systemic and corporate business of mass incarceration of black people today.

Additionally, in the continual shootings of unarmed black people in the U.S., the victim's physique is often referenced by official or vigilante law enforcement as justification for their death. These cases are also often followed by a not guilty verdict for law enforcement or, more commonly, a failure by a grand jury to indict the shooting officer and bring the case in front of a jury. White police officer Darren Wilson, who shot and killed black teenager Mike Brown in 2014, stated that, "When I grabbed him, the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan" (Sanburn 2). Wilson was 6' 4" and 210 lbs. and Brown was 6' 4" and 292 lbs. at the time of Brown's death (Sanburn 2). In 2012, in reference to the killing of black teenager

80

Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman, a mixed race Hispanic man, "Zimmerman told police that Martin looked suspicious because he was wearing a hoodie…" (Gutman and Tienabeso 1). This case sparked U.S. national debate on the moral issues entwined within the assumption that a child or person wearing a hoodie denotes suspicious activity, especially if that person is black. These examples of how a negative moral value is placed on an entire race within U.S. law enforcement is best summed up by Lieutenant Javier Ortiz, former Miami, Florida Police Union President, when he wrote on social media in 2015: "Act like a thug and we will treat you like one" in reference to the killing of 12-year old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, Ohio (Elfrink 3).

Therefore, in this dissertation, I want the reader to know that I, in the role as a black researcher, and my research participants, as black dance artists, sense that mass incarceration and the killing of unarmed black people are not only disregarded by the courts, but often excused by citizens, elected officials, and those in law enforcement. This means that the language in the examples previously cited indicates a deeply embedded relationship between blackness, black culture, and U.S. moral values. The killing of young black children and youth, such as 12-year old Tamir Rice holding a toy gun at the time of his death, and 7-year old Aiyana Mo'Nay Stanley-Jones killed during a raid of her home, were both deemed warranted accidents with no indictment of police action as well. The most recent young black person killed is 15-year old Jordan Edwards, who was shot fatally in the head by Roy Oliver, a white police officer in Dallas, Texas this past April 2017. Law enforcement's story around his shooting has changed and shifted

81

tremendously after the media initially reported the incident. Oliver described the vehicle Edwards was driving as moving towards them aggressively, while later he admitted that he was mistaken (Stack and Houser 2). In the state of Minnesota, Philando Castile was shot and killed by police officer Jeronimo Yanez during a routine traffic stop, even though Castile was being compliant and non-combative. Yanez was not indicted and was cleared of all charges (Smith 1). These incidences continue the haunting vibrations of racial injustice and suffering that plague U.S. societal experience and way of life, thus sustaining the horrendous extremes of violence led by moral bias still present and active since the transatlantic enslavement period.

And, finally, there is Sandra Bland, who was attacked after being pulled over by a police officer for failing to signal at a light. Police allege that she committed suicide in her jail cell, which is highly contested by her family, community members, and activists. In 2016, her family sued the counties and jailers involved and settled at 1.9 million dollars for the wrongful death of Bland (Botelho and Ford 2). Bland's case is particularly relevant to this dissertation, one grounded in diasporic philosophies and practices of black U.S. women in the field of dance. These women, most who are quite like Sandra, are a part of the college and university teaching systems. Sandra Bland was apparently on her way to a professorship at her alma mater, Prairie View A & M University, when she was stopped by police. This could have easily and literally been any of the women included in this dissertation, and it could have been me. These examples show that the world W.E.B. Du Bois dreamed of is not fully realized in our society. There is still much

work to be done. The interviews revealed later in this dissertation explore and reveal how these fatal occurrences, past and present, have become societal normalities, and influence the orientations around citizenship for the black/African descent women teacher, performers, and choreographers in this dissertation. The research participants discuss living in the philosophies and practices of black/African diasporic dances personally and professionally.

Gloria Anzaldúa, an American scholar of Chicana cultural, feminist, and queer theories, uses the term *counterstance* as a means for discussing the immigrant experience in the U.S. Her work can help elucidate the previously cited examples of white aggression towards blacks, and the black response, specifically in the case of Sandra Bland. Counterstance, Anzaldúa explains, "locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed...reduced to a common denominator of violence...all reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against" (Anzaldúa 100-101). Sandra Bland, during her interaction with a police officer, was clearly in a state of, to use Anzaldúa's word, counterstance. Director of Dancing While Black in New York, Paloma McGregor, also reminded me of Anzaldúa's words in an informal discussion we had the day after the 2016 presidential election. In our conversation, we discussed how staying in a continual reactionary state regarding violence or racial inequities can also keep us distracted from what we may be fighting for, since we are so focused on what we are fighting against. Paloma McGregor expressed a desire to really hone in on what we want as black U.S. citizens and then what we need to bring these wants to fruition. To go beyond this

83

reactive orientation, would be what Anzaldúa says is "…a step towards liberation from cultural domination…," and a disengagement from "…the dominant culture…." (100). Anzaldúa further advocated that we make an attempt to "…write it [reactive orientation] off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory…" (101).

Author, innovator, futurist, and teacher Nat Irvin II further discusses how some black peoples and communities orient themselves away from victimization as their only approach to solving racial violence. Irvin, as the founder of the IF (IdeaFestival), maintains that individuals do not have to be geographically or socially-privileged to have great ideas and create positive change. In the following, Irvin discusses how a new generation of Africans and African Americans, he titles "thrivals," have the power to create change. He begins by describing thrivals as,

> the post-struggle generation of Africans and African Americans, characterized by a keen awareness of and appreciation for multiculturalism, globalization, and change. Drawing on strengths derived from historical victimization and oppression, they actively participate in global economics and politics and are a strong influence on social change. Individuals are typically competitive, critical, savvy, and educated and have an outlook that is international and multicultural (Irvin 17).

Keep in mind that Irvin's description of thrivals is useful when reading the narratives shared in this dissertation's case studies. Many of the research participants include themselves in the next generation of black dance artists trying to develop their abilities for being "competitive, critical, savvy, and educated," while also having an outlook that is international and multiply-cultured. Irvin further defined *thrivals* as those

84

who do not reject past histories and their places within these histories; instead, they draw on the strengths they sense coming from this oppression and victimization.

Diasporic blackness Within and Beyond the United States

For some black people reared in a particular diasporic location in the world with a strong contingent of black/African descendent people, such as the United States, it may become important to embrace a global black identity or engagement wiith blackness that connects them to a global black/African Diaspora—an orientation beyond their own lived experience. In communities that associate not only with being black but also with black/African diasporic identities, one can uncover how moments of conflict inspire collective action against oppression, thus generating a shared global orientation of blackness: black people rise in solidarity to restore justice and heal from oppression. An example of this shared orientation of diasporic blackness is reflected in the existence of the London Black Panther Party. The British or UK Black Panthers rallied around Bobby Seale, the founder of the British Black Panther Party, who was being tried for murder in New Haven, Connecticut in 1970. The British Black Panther Party could have remained focused on their local and specific efforts to support civil and human rights for black peoples; however, they chose to connect their efforts, through protests, to a global cause that fought to exonerate Seale (Angelo 17). Although the Black Panther Party has its international headquarters in U.S., and black Londoners' historical relationship to blackness has distinctions from that of U.S. Americans, the party at that time was grounded in a shared global experience of oppression. This was a moment where

blackness as an identity became global and diasporic: black Londoners could relate and contribute to a discourse of diasporic blackness.

In addition to collective action around oppression, solidarity has been achieved around positive cultural commonalities and understandings. For example, Kwanzaa is a cultural practice developed by Maulana Karenga in 1966. This secular cultural holiday was created for African Americans as a way to be reconnected with their lost history before the transatlantic enslavement period. The week-long celebration and contemplative practice continues to be widely observed in U.S. black and/or African American communities. Further, the first *World Festival of Negro Arts* is another celebratory event bringing people together from across the African diaspora. The first festival was directed by renowned African American scholar, dancer, and choreographer Katherine Dunham in 1966. The festival intertwined black/African diasporic dancers, performers, and choreographers from around the globe on the continent of Africa in Senegal, West Africa. Throughout the narratives shared by the research participants, the reader will find more continuing examples of how diasporic practices are being used to create a way to connect to a lost history.

Shared triumphs and struggles of blackness have been a grounding element in most movements of black identity across the globe since the 1800s. These identities are shown to be expansive and inclusive of all those whose African ancestors endured the forced migration by Europeans during the transatlantic enslavement period, as well as those that experienced colonialism in differing geographical locations. Exploring how

86

blackness and black identities become formed into collective or communal orientation is a common thread throughout this dissertation's narratives since the research participants are specifically working within and through a world of black/African diasporic dance philosophies and practices. These black/African diasporic dance communities thus exist in many ways because people with black/African diasporic identities found a need for them to be created; they had a need for shared experiences and connections as an essential process for thriving.

Pan Africanism, Afrocentricity, and Diaspora

The intensity of traversing historical and contemporary racism within U.S. society as a black person since the transatlantic enslavement period has led to a continuum of intellectual, cultural, social, and political movements within differing black communities. Two well established movements that are a part of this continuum are Pan Africanism and Afrocentricity. These movements center the values, theories, and practices of black/African diasporic peoples across the globe.

Pan Africanism emerged in the late 1800s and introduced some of the underpinnings for 20th century blackness and black identity. This movement's main effort was focused on creating global and political unity amongst black peoples and their descendants whose lives were detrimentally influenced by colonialism and the transatlantic enslavement period. W.E.B. Du Bois is a legendary initiator of this movement through his writings and efforts to maintain relationships with other diasporic scholars. He was a "driving force behind the pan-African congresses" in which delegates

87

from around the world gathered to discuss shared experiences of black people—

specifically addressing their struggles" (Afari-Gyan 1). Further, Du Bois forged a strong

relationship with Kwame Nkrumah, who was crucial to Ghana gaining independence

from the British in 1957 and who went on to serve as Ghana's first prime minister in

1957 and first president in 1960 (Afari-Gyan 4). Nkrumah was an advocate of Pan

Africanism and a founding member of the Organization of African Unity. The ideals and

concepts of Pan Africanism espoused by Du Bois and Nkrumah are intricately woven

through the historical groundings of blackness and help trace U.S. black identity in 20th

century. Furthermore, Pan Africanism continues to prompt academic and political

dialogue on what a black/African Diaspora was, is, and can be.

Afrocentricity, emerging post-Civil war and becoming a major force for the study

of Africa in the 20th century, was defined by aforementioned theorist Molefi Kete Asante

in a 2012 interview as, "a paradigm which infuses all phenomena from the standpoint of

African people as subjects in human history rather than as on the fringes of someone

else's culture" (Turner 718). The 1960s, when Asante was first becoming deeply involved

in the Civil Rights Movement, was a time of de-centering European/Western/White

cultural orientations as the starting point of the existence for all people. Afrocentricity's

aim is to find a remedy for the loss of cultural connection amongst Africans and African

Diasporic people by re/establishing the home or motherland Africa as a philosophical

center of intellectual and cultural discourse. This was particularly significant for black

U.S. people whose history included forced migration, dispersal, and dislocation from Africa.

Another key element to Afrocentrism is that it has a strong educational agenda. Asante is credited for creating the first doctoral program in African American Studies in the U.S. at Temple University (Turner 712). This groundbreaking program sparked a surge in the development of more African and African American studies programs worldwide. Thus, Afrocentrism brings continental African and black/African diasporic histories of Africa from the peripheries and/or margins of academic focus and puts them at the center of discourse by recognizing that people of African descent have not only ways of life that are valuable and well-developed in themselves, but are also deeply influential in the American history and culture as a whole. It was/is an effort to honor the wisdom, history, and contributions of black peoples of African descent, to reveal foundations for black/African cultures, and to bring pride to black/African peoples and their ways of life. While Afrocentricity continued as an important creation in the 20th century development of the black experience, diverse perspectives have emerged from this discourse, creating new blackness dialogues for the 21st century. Exploring these dialogues through the voices of the research participants is an objective for this dissertation. Hopefully, through their voices insightful, burgeoning perspectives on how black/African values, when centered in educational, artistic, and bodily discourse, are contributing to the larger and diverse knowledge on U.S. and global blackness.

Like Pan Africanism, Afrocentricity was a response to the damage done by colonization and transatlantic slavery, playing a major role in facilitating a connection to the continent of Africa for black peoples of African descent worldwide. Both movements were developed to re/connect African diasporic peoples' lived experience to a homeland. However, these ways of approaching culture emerging from black/African diasporic lived experiences are also highly critiqued. Sociologist Paul Gilroy, author of the pivotal work *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, revealed W.E.B. Du Bois' early approaches to discussing black peoples in the world and blacks in Africa as a "...rather idealized, volkish conception of African-American exceptionalism..." (Gilroy 127).

African and African American studies scholar Tunde Adeleke further described a popular critique amongst scholars concerning Molefi Asante's diasporic perspectives through an Afrocentric approach. He stated that Asante's perspective "sustains a romanticized, abstract, and idealized Africa, emphasizing a non-existent harmony and consensus" amongst people of African descent in the world (Adeleke 510). Therefore, the philosophical worlds espoused by Du Bois and Asante and critiqued by Adeleke and Gilroy are currently seen as complex in terms of a Pan African "inherent unity" (Adeleke 510). Further critique also questions the idea that black U.S. peoples or African Americans can claim an African identity. According to Adeleke, this identity relationship between native continental Africans and native African Americans may have been practically at the "heart of a" past "Pan Africanism," but rarely exists in the same form of

90

unity today (Adeleke 511). This notion of Africa as idealized and romanticized will also appear throughout the voices of the research participants in Chapters VI and VII.

Since slavery through 1960s Civil Rights movement in the U.S., and with notions of Afrocentricity, Pan Africanism, and images of Africa in mind, some black people in the U.S. focused more on returning to live in Africa as the "motherland." In *Africa, Brazil, and the Construction of Trans-Atlantic Black Identities,* Livio Sansone stated that, "ideas of negritude, blackness and pan-Africanism" were "created in the struggles for independence or by images of what African societies were prior to European colonization" (2), and these images may have been limited in presenting African societies comprehensively. In his book, Sansone also seems to be advocating for an improvisational structure where focusing on Africa the founding location may shift with new generations and new information (e.g. focusing on specific locations in Africa or in other areas of the diaspora). Thus, a morphing of what grounds black and African descendent diasporic identities can be built upon and described differently in terms of individual contexts and needs.

Valiant attempts have been made by Afrocentric, Pan African, and African-centered communities to forge pathways through a complex maze of black identity by connecting to a past blackness in Africa. A resonating and lingering question is how black diasporic peoples can move forward without locking culture into a specific time capsule. In this current generation of 21st century thinkers and theorists, there is a movement to shift away from romanticized a-historic perspectives of black/African

91

diasporic experience and movement towards a deeper contemporary and global understanding of black/African diasporic peoples. There is, therefore, a focus that favors engaging with black/African diasporic experience as something that people are actively doing and not something that is fixed, complete, and or stagnant—it is an alive, morphing *diasporic practice*. Sansone further discusses Paul Gilroy's description of 20th century "blackness" and black identity in its present connections to "whiteness" and the widening geographic borders of black/African diasporic experience beyond white or European centeredness (4). Also in 2005, Roger Brubaker wrote an article that introduced a shift in perspective when engaging with the term diaspora. Brubaker takes the focus of the word from an "entity" approach and, instead, engages with diasporic practice as an "idiom, stance, or claim" (12). Brubaker also imagined diaspora as a place to practice. In Chapters VI and VII, the research participants will be presented as exploring this notion of practice and place of practice.

As the process of unfolding the connection between African-ness, blackness, and black/African diasporic identities continues, it is clear that there should be some leeway for those who want to connect to a past and make an attempt to gather what has been lost, stolen, and/or destroyed in their cultural heritage. Romanticizing and idealizing Africa and the histories of black diasporic peoples can be perceived as a normal primary stage in the process of understanding a past way of life, as an outsider. Due to the nature and history of transatlantic enslavement, black U.S. people experience Africa socially from an insider and outsider perspective—walking with African blood and DNA, but not reared

on the continent. Some cultural elements may feel familiar and others not at all. Interrelations between black peoples in Africa, internally in the U.S., globally, and through diasporic practices have suffered in the past, still suffer today. How these challenges, pauses, and gaps influence the personal and professional lives of diasporic movement practitioners in this dissertation as well as their efforts to understand an African-ness being descendants of those who survived the transatlantic enslavement period and those reared in the U.S. will be discussed in the following chapters. This dissertation, through the voices of the research participants, tries to open new insights into this complexity of identity by describing where African-ness is located in connection to black U.S. women/peoples traversing blackness in the U.S. and diasporically. Ideas about diasporic practice uncovered in the ideas presented in this chapter will be the basis of my analysis and discussion of the ideas shared by the diasporic movement practitioners in this dissertation.

Grounding the black/African Diasporic Nomadic, Multiple, and Divergent

For the work of this dissertation, there are three theoretical lines of thought that contributed to a developing an orientation for imagining blackness and a black/African Diaspora. These lines of theory include: diaspora as a nomadic term, diaspora as multiple, and diaspora as a practice. In order to express how diaspora can be imagined, it is essential to create a foundation for or ground the term in history and theory.

To continue grounding an orientation around what a diaspora is or involves, the work of Roger Brubaker, in his article "The 'diaspora' diaspora," was a helpful inquiry. Brubaker

93

explicated some components of a diaspora, to include dispersion, homeland orientation, and boundary maintenance. Dispersion speaks to forced migrations and "people living outside of homeland" (5). Homeland orientation was the idea that a "motherland" exists and that the people who were forced to migrate away from their homelands will want to return to that motherland (Brubaker 5). Boundary maintenance involves distinctive identity formations in host societies—meaning the creation or integration of a new way of life and identifying culturally in a new homeland (Brubaker 6). Brubaker's components speak to the forceful dispersion of black peoples from a homeland by describing how the dispersed people relate to their homeland when holding on to ways of life distinctive from the new homeland's societal norms and values. According to Brubaker, black people practicing throughout a diaspora intersect in their efforts to create histories based on an African homeland's historical commonalities and cultural retentions of Africa.

Therefore, in discussions concerning black/African diasporic peoples or movement to improve black life, one response, continuing from the 1940s, was to focus on the forced migration of African peoples from Africa and the continued marginalization of their descendants. This response promoted the notion of Africa as a homeland where black diasporic peoples can connect to their cultural values and practices from wherever they are located across the globe. With this orientation, blacks are given methods for developing and maintaining cultural boundaries in their host communities. These methods included creating, through the ideas posited by Pan Africanism and

Afrocentricity, "black only spaces" to address particular needs and issues. These spaces included developing celebrations connected to Africa, such as Kwanzaa; or asserting agency over, and claiming responsibility for, the protection, nourishment, and education of black communities through programs supported by the Black Power Movement. The Black Panthers particularly wanted to establish equal separation in their neighborhoods by maintaining authority and responsibility in every area of black life (protection, food, education, etc.).

In her book *Yurugu: An African Centered Critique of European Thought and Behavior*, Dona Marimba (also known as Marimba Ani), a contributor to the theoretical framing of the Afrocentricity movement, explains that the pathology of a European world view affects people who have origins outside of that cultural lineage (Adeleke 507). Her writings give more credence to the idea that people of African descent needed to often do things separately from the surrounding European communities since a European way-of-life framework was not working for African Americans holistically. Ideas of blackness needed to be separated and centered around African-based cultural understandings in order to develop into something that would be useful for black peoples of African descent.

Throughout this chapter and especially in this section, I have tried to present how the journey to understand black/African diasporic lived experiences is sometimes historically coherent and well-informed, and at other times romantic and disjointed. The relevant aspects for this dissertation, which is focused on black U.S. women committed to

sharing black/African descendent dances through teaching, choreographing, and performing, is the orientation of diaspora as a practice, as nomadic, and as multiple. These theoretical lines were first revealed to me by the work of Roger Brubaker, Brent Hayes Edwards, and Earl Lewis. Diaspora itself implies a nomadic moving, which also makes people who traverse a traveling diasporic practice of a nomadic orientation. This moving/positioning will hopefully assist the reader in developing any understandings of blackness and diaspora as global movements which are always in a state of becoming with each new generation.

When considering that the origins of the word diaspora come from the Jewish culture, understandings of the term as moving beyond a closed or explicit African dispersal, towards a complex, global history of forced migration and racialization can be insightful. According to historian Edward A. Alpers, Earl Lewis calls this layering of complexities of diasporas "overlapping diasporas" (Alpers 14). Edward A. Alpers wrote in his article "Defining the African Diaspora" of Lewis's diasporic overlappings as including the contextual, merged, and divergent layering of the Jewish and the black/African diasporic orientations. Both diasporas can be considered distant cousins— meaning each community orienting around diaspora knows of one another's existence, but they may not come together often to sort out their familial relations.

Edward A. Alpers reported that the term diaspora was adopted from Jewish orientations and "first employed by George Shepperson in a paper at the International Congress of African History held at the University of Dar Salaam in Tanzania, in 1965,"

(2). The groundwork for developing and labeling a black/African diaspora was in its very creation a layering of multiple worlds and a nomadic migration due to its connection to Jewish history, making it only natural that cultural and geographical overlapping would become an active motivator for diasporic practice.

With this notion of overlapping ideas in mind, W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness or multiple souls begins to resurface as significant and the framework for this concept is expanding as theorists work to unfold the multiplicity of diasporic practice. One such theorist is Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, who explores blackness in U.S. American, Caribbean, and Brazilian historiographies. Zeleza used terms like "political blackness" and "ontologies of blackness" (or ways of being black or in blackness) to compare and differentiate the ways that blackness manifests throughout the cultures of diaspora (17-18). When framing the multiple qualities of blackness and diaspora, thus, one can create a multiple consciousness associated with multiple identities, living several existences and/or souls in one human being. For example, there are people of African descent throughout the world that may identify as multiply black from various angles, such as claiming African, American, black, diasporic, Caribbean, and/or South American identity markers. These "multi-identitied" people live in and through places of nuanced and varying cultural practices, often as they cross the borders between the racialized and cultural identities of black and white. Additionally, some black people might also feel a pull to settle into a more singular role as a black person, thus holding back or stifling the potential for multiplicity in identity, to attain a certain

level of success and an ability to thrive in various communities/societies in which they must live and work.

This way of moving through the world by navigating differing identities is also discussed by Nat Irvin II when describing what he termed "thrivals," or those people who refuse to be identified only through victimization (discussed in a previous section of this chapter). The thrivals find ways to create multiple vantage points, maybe multiple identities, consciousnesses, and even souls, in order to move beyond stagnation or erasure of identity created by transatlantic slavery and the lingerings beyond the transatlantic enslavement period. Furthermore, the dispersal of millions of people from the African continent itself during the transatlantic slavery led to an extremely diverse foundation for global ways of life amongst black/African peoples throughout the world. The continent of Africa has thousands of ethnic groups, and countless cultural practices within those groups that mix, merge, and appear as retentions in global diasporic experience. What black/African peoples walk with in their bodies daily includes overlapping, layered, and/or merging multiple identity possibilities. These possibilities are expressed in how they are creating, practicing, and/or performing life and dance: a moving through multiple, what I call, *diasporic nomadic orientations*.

Brent Hayes Edwards, in his 2009 book *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, intricately describes multiplicities through differences in the practice of diaspora, or how difference allows for multiplicity and unity with temporality and distance as key components. Edwards specifically focuses

on language through print, written word, and/or literature in the black transnational

culture of the 1920s and 1930s. This dissertation intersects with the work of Edwards in

its orientations around the French word "décalage." Edwards describes *décalage* as a

"gap, discrepancy, time-lag, or interval" (13). He is interested in how differences,

nuances, and variances are temporal in nature and, thus, become elements that live in the

décalage; a space where words cannot be translated, exchanged, or balanced. Edwards

further unravels how "space in time" or the "in between" spaces are manifested in the

black/African diaspora. *Décalage* for Edwards, "…indicates a re-establishment of a prior

unevenness or diversity…" (14). These diversities, differences, nuances, and/or variances

in Edwards's work relate to the way in which language was used around blackness and

throughout diaspora in the 1920s and 1930s, especially by people of European descent

and of African descent who were proponents for transatlantic slavery and those who were

abolitionists.

Edwards took on the task of sorting through some of the French and English

language exchange of the 1920s and 30s to illuminate the complexities defining

blackness, a complexity that can now be more fully seen with historical hindsight. By

discussing the history of words like *négre*, negro, and noir, Edwards also speaks to the

way in which the vast ethnic groups and cultural practices on the continent of Africa and

across the black/African diaspora diverge. With a contemporary attention to historical

cultural practices and orientations, Edwards presents the multi-layered nuances practiced

when defining blackness. In the following passage, Edwards elaborated on how words

existed nomadically and multiply even during transatlantic slavery:

> In French, the first translations of African narratives of the early Spanish and
> Portuguese explorers and slave traders in the mid-sixteenth century almost
> exclusively used *noir* for the Spanish or Portuguese *negro* (meaning "black" the
> color), which was read as representing solely a color description. Only in the late
> 1500s and early 1600s did there begin to develop an understanding of negro that
> considered the term to represent a particular people and to mark their difference
> (Edwards 26).

> Interestingly, in French, the development of *négre* had relatively little impact on
> the color designation *noir*, and thus we find French abolitionists adopting the
> latter term as a proper noun in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century,
> attempting to invest it with connotations of humanity and citizenship… (Edwards
> 27).

The following continues Edwards's findings on how the identity of the black person was

complicated when he quotes Serge Dagat, an abolitionist, whose use of the word *noir* is

noted. Edwards claimed that Dagat:

> considered himself the master of a relatively new term, one which he would
> consider capable of introducing ideological substratums into his literature of
> combat. This set of circumstances helps to explain the reasons black French
> citizens in the early twentieth century tended to describe themselves as "Noirs"—
> which indeed was second only to "hommes de couleur" [people of color] as self-
> designations among the elite. (Edwards 27).

Brent Hayes Edwards further called upon the famed philosopher, psychiatrist,

revolutionary, and writer Frantz Fanon, whose reference to the word *négre* is seen by

Edwards to be directly connected to *nigger* in how it was used by those in charge of those

enslaved (Edwards 27). For example, Fanon wrote, "[o]ver, there where the niggers

{*négre*}were," meaning in Africa (citation). Fanon also wrote, to seal the intention, "As

we see, the positions were clear-cut: on the one hand, the black {*négre*} [nigger], the

African; on the other, the European and the Antillean. The Antillean was a Negro [*noir*],

but black {*négre*} [nigger] was in Africa" (citation). These passages exhibit the shifting,

nuanced, multiple and nomadic nature of words and the way in which difference can be

honored while still creating a complex and intertwined unification potential. The

teaching, choreographing , and performing of the black/African diasporic dances by

movement artist follows suit as you will see in Chapter V and VI of this dissertation. The

translations and renderings they manifest live in multiplicity and the diversity around the

approach to them is evident when reading the collective resolves of their interviews.

Décalage also "…alludes to the taking away of something that was added in the

first place, something artificial…" (Edwards 14), possibly meaning that what has been

created around diasporic practice is an idea that unevenness and diversity were at some

time non-existent in cultures of the African continent or culture of blackness. In some

way in our diasporic practice, singular and monolithic expressions of diaspora, have been

accepted as truth with diversity deemed as not real, or maybe just not what was needed.

Edwards's passages on language above demonstrate otherwise. The difference was

always present throughout history and beyond the United States. This is demonstrated by

the complexities I noted in the beginning of this chapter as I struggle to find a term for

blacks living in the United States, many of which are descendants of people who were

forced into migration from the continent of Africa through transatlantic enslavement.

Edwards summarized this dilemma:

> The black diasporic *décalage* among African Americans and Africans is not
> simply geographical distance, nor is it simply difference in evolution or

consciousness…*décalage* is the kernel of precisely that which cannot be transferred or exchanged, the received biases that reuse to pass over when one crosses the water. It is a changing core of difference; it is the work of 'differences within unity' (14).

Edwards is asserting that the distance, gap, or time lag that is experienced as the cultures cross the water, presumably black/African diasporic descendent cultures, and the realization of the difference between them, is a place to gain unity. This is a unity that can be created by acknowledging and honoring diversity.

Ironically and delightfully, Edwards further uses the body and movement as metaphors for the *décalage* of diasporic practice and to express diasporic differences as coming together through their shared linkings, their joints, to create a unity of action.

The joint is a curious place, as it is a point of linkage…décalage, in providing a model for what resists and escapes translation [difference] through the African diaspora, alludes to this strange "two-ness" of the joint [which links various body parts]. It directs our attention to the "anti-thetical structure" of the term diaspora, its risky intervention. My contention, finally, is that articulations of diaspora demand to be approached this way, through their *décalage*. For paradoxically, it is exactly such a haunting gap or discrepancy that allows the African diaspora to "step" and "move" in various articulations. Articulation is always a strange and ambivalent gesture, because finally, in the body it is only difference—the separation of bones or members—that allows movement. (15)

The joints, connecting bones and members, are where the actual articulation of the difference and multiplicities can be practiced performed, shared, and lived through the active, unified body.

In summary, the theorists highlighted in this chapter, Alpers, Brubaker, Edwards, Adeleke, and Lewis, explored how to develop language that can explain "black people elsewhere doing different things or the same things in different ways" (Edwards 115).

These theorists aspire to produce methods that create "fruitful… and more precise…

diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices, and so on" (Brubaker 13). Adeleke

also desired an expansion of this diasporic practice, particularly one that brings elements

and considerations from the peripheries to fertilize global, black/African diasporic

dialogues. These unfolding diasporic practices move through shifting locations of potent,

imaginative, and potentially infinite theoretical concepts. These moving concepts also

move through this dissertation as they bring the body, dance, and movement into

dialogue with diasporic practice through the research participants' multiple identities as

artists, teachers, performers, and choreographers. This nomadic "identity travel" is what I

call a *diasporic movement practice*. Further, the ideas discussed in this dissertation will,

hopefully, develop insights into how the intertwining of multiple identities and

orientations can also create a vibrant, united collective.