

The “Ring Shout”: A Corporeal Conjuring of Black-Togetherness

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We would form a circle, each touching those next to us so as to physically express our spiritual closeness. (Richards 1990, 217)

Invocation

We come together.
We are.
We come together.
We are brought together by a rhythm.

We are brought together by rhythm,
and we are held together by rhythm.
We are held together by rhythm we are.

We are bound together by rhythm,
the rhythm of the beating heart,
the beating heart that is within us all,
that is within all living bodies/beings.

We are held together by that rhythm,
that beating rhythm that holds us together brings us life
sustains our life.

That beating rhythm, that is.
What holds us together brings us together.

That holds us in one
that holds us in one community,
one living community,
one human community

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That community that is stabilized through the beating,
beating heart,
the beating heart.

The rhythm within
the rhythm that reverberates the bones,
the rhythm that moves the blood,
The rhythm, the rhythm, the rhythm recalls.

The rhythm contains us.
The rhythm propels us.
The rhythm moves us.
The rhythm brings us together.
We are assembled by the beating, beating, beating rhythm within our bodies.
Let that rhythm guide us,

let that rhythm propel us into new territories,
into new realms,
into new existences.

That rhythm,
that combining rhythm,
that assembles us all,
that brings us all into each other.

That holds us all together
as a human race,
as a people,
as spirit.

That beating rhythm that guides us and pushes us, and propels us into life,
into living that rhythm.
That beating rhythm,
that beating rhythm of the heart that is so quiet in the body yet ever-present

That beating rhythm in the heart
Of the heart.
That is so quiet, yet so loud.

That beating rhythm of the heart,
pushing life through us,
pushing our life in us,
communicating with us,
sustaining us,
holding us,
let that rhythm guide us.

Let that beating, beating, beating heart,
guide us and hold us in one.

Assemble us here together.
Assemble us here today, beating heart.

Let us feel the beating heart that resides in our bodies.
Let us feel together
The beating heart that holds our community as one.

Let our ancestors hear our beating heart.¹

Introduction

In 1995, while still an undergraduate dance student at Howard University, I witnessed a performance of Reggie Wilson/Fist and Heel Performance Group at Dance Place in Washington, DC, titled “holy.” Among various solo and group works in the evening, what took prominence most significantly was “Shouting Rings” (1994). The work centered on the African American Ring Shout tradition from which his company’s name is inspired. It was the first time witnessing a live Ring Shout. Until that moment, my primary engagement with the Ring Shout was courses in Black dance history that focused on the tradition’s significance to the African experience in the Americas; witnessing the work planted in me a deep curiosity. I wanted to know more, learn more, and see more. Unfortunately, seeing more was a significant challenge. Unless one frequents the sea island low country of Georgia or South Carolina, experiencing a Ring Shout in its traditional African American sociocultural context would prove difficult.

Nevertheless, in a pre-Internet society, the best options were written research, films and videos, music/sound recordings, and other research-centered media from library resources. Then something happened a year or two later. The Philadelphia Dance Company (aka PhilaDanco) performed at the Kennedy Center. In the evening was a work by the legendary choreographer Talley Beatty, titled *Southern Landscape* (1948). Here I was again, up close and personal with the Ring Shout as translated through the lived experience and choreographic aesthetics of Beatty. Varying aesthetics aside, I was equally captivated by each.

In 2002, I approached the form and its aesthetics in a choreographic work for now-defunct Washington, DC-based Washington Reflections Dance Company, titled “South Country” (2005). Through the movement and gestural vocabulary of “South Country,” I narrated a migratory journey through the interwoven terrain of subservience and resistance. My research of the Ring Shout, really a kind of quest, continued, when in 2018, I presented “The Body of Essence: Ring Shouts and other Afro-Futurities,” a collaborative embodied workshop with artists ChE Ware and André M. Zachery during a CADD² workshop session. The workshop was a participatory Ring Shout exploring its Afro-futuristic possibility and liberatory promise. My research and creation of a Ring Shout was with the intention of claiming and bearing witness, through my body and embodied research, to the tradition as a rich and valuable cultural asset. I wanted to connect to the ancient energy of the African-centered sacred circle and imagine this as a starting point for healing and liberation through both the intellectual and aesthetic value of the material of the tradition. Comprehending the Ring Shout, as fundamentally a liberatory practice, offers the opportunity to source its form as a site from which I could come into direct and simultaneous contact with the past, present, and future.

Alternately, the voice, clapped rhythm, new song compositions, and video projections integrated in “The Body of Essence” created a scoring by which the public participants could journey along and personally contribute to the temporal experience. Through the experience of “The Body of Essence,” the ground was primed for multiple engagements, at once providing one access to the recollection of their old-time Pentecostal church upbringing, another to vodou-esque spiritual practice, and still another to secular artistry steeped in African diasporic lifeways.

What stands as an impression today of the various Ring Shouts I have witnessed and facilitated is its activation of movement/dance as a collective and kinesthetic impulse. In each instance, from my first encounter with Reggie Wilson and his group to my explorations, the kinesthesia of the

stomping and shuffling feet, the clapping hands, and the pounding stick (in the case of Wilson and the McIntosh County Shouters³) carry a significant force of remembrance. In their varied concert and community practice settings, considering the Ring Shout as embodied activations of *ancestral recall[ing]* (a term I borrow from “Ancestral Recall,” a 2019 composition by New Orleans trumpeter Chief Xian aTunde Adjuah [formerly Christian Scott]) must take precedence. Wilson embellishes and deepens what I term an *AfrOist* spiritual component in Black concert dance through his choreographic adaptation of the Ring Shout. The dancers and vocalists dressed in white with head ties, lace, and fabric layered on the body and cinched at the waist are reminiscent of a neo-Hoodoo sacred gathering, conjured through rhythm, movement, and song. Beatty’s *Southern Landscape*, preceding Wilson by forty-four years, offers a glimpse of a southern plantation-style shout in which the dancers gather in the deep of the night to call upon the spiritual and sacred energies in order to assist in their momentary deliverance from the pressures of perpetual servitude and in resistance against the dominating oppressive forces. The McIntosh County Shouters sustain the tradition trans-generationally. The indigo denim overalls, worn by the men, and the colonial dresses worn by the circling women provide an impactful image of ancestral memory of the African journey in the new world. The impact of embodied knowledge remains present in all variations. It is made richer by their specific nuances giving way to the conception of the Ring Shout as an *AfrOist* tradition in the Americas. In this intangible yet formal space and place, the Shouters recover memories, crafting new and renewing old traditions. The Ring Shout stands as an oracular tradition of intuition and intelligence in which the forging of new pathways leads to the recuperation of wisdom as an outcome of remembering. So, I can say that this tradition, the Ring Shout, the “first African dance in America,” as Wilson has described it, has a central place in my life as I continue to encounter its layers as an African American tradition. Like a benevolent *haint*,⁴ the Ring Shout accompanies me and procures a permanent space in my mind-body.

What I am asserting with my use of *AfrOist* as a cultural paradigm is a departure from *Africanist* in an effort to re-situate African descendant lineages, practices, and traditions on a cyclical continuum that has not been broken but reimagined through a process of decentralization and re-instigation, in the embodied consciousness of African descendants globally, including those of continental Africa. This is in no way to deny the reality of origination, as it applies to continental Africa, and its various ancient knowledge, as a cultural source. However, in order to gain greater comprehension of the ways by which ideas and practices can be reorganized and reappropriated from new and different points of origin and sociopolitical realities, it is useful to consider the *authority* of African diasporic cultures in reimagining ancient concepts and practices, such as the traditions of Hoodoo, Haitian Vodou, Lukumi, and the myriad spiritual traditions born during and after the transatlantic slave trade. *AfrOism* is a principle that honors the inclusive and vast African diasporic past, present, and future in and through the body. In my use of the capital *O*, I am crafting a visual dissonance intended to foreground circularity as inclusivity, and in relation to the Ring Shout, the capital *O* functions as a repetitive symbolic conjuring and mirroring of the tradition and its significance within the cultures that gave birth to it and maintain it as a cultural phenomenon.

The Ring Shout as a conjuring of Black-togetherness is theoretical and practical. I aim to reveal what is at play and at stake in the practice. How does the Ring Shout reveal, temporally and spatially, its underlying nature of ancestral recall[ing]? How do rhythm and movement energize and fortify this intention? Moreover, how does the Ring Shout achieve its goal and make possible the actualizing of Black-togetherness for Black communities past and present? For clarity on these questions, I turn to the cultural practice itself to unearth through observation, interpretation, reflection on practice, and analysis of the “form,” to convey the profound revelation within its aesthetics. The various components of my argument shed light on notions of assembly, Blackness, togetherness, movement, and conjuration in ways that offer new context around embodied activism, implicit and explicit, in constant play within Black cultural modes. Additionally, I reference the scholarship of those who have journeyed *’round* this topic before me to address this ever-giving well of *AfrOist* spirituality, including Reggie Wilson, Byron C. M. White, Dr. Christopher Johnson, Dona Richards,

Katrina Hazzard-Donald, Dr. Yvonne Daniel, M. Jacqui Alexander, and others. In this text, I employ ancestral recall[ing] to highlight the uniquely physical, interpersonal, and transcendental act of collective remembering of those blood relatives and notable individuals who have preceded us and have transitioned into the realm of the ancestors, and even mighty echoes of those very traditions/practices that these forebears themselves enacted.

This research and exploration of the Ring Shout locates itself at this spatial and temporal juncture. At its roots, the Ring Shout addresses and embodies an ancestral recall[ing]. Even in its Christian manifestation, as is the practice of the present shouter groups of coastal Gullah-Geechee culture of Georgia and South Carolina (most notably the McIntosh County Shouters), the Ring Shout highlights an inherited familial tradition. Deeper still, the Ring Shout itself is a conjuring, through a shared and transcendental embodiment, of those ancestors that watch over and guide the living, ensuring their connection with the deceased for individual and communal well-being. Today and through time, the Ring Shout has functioned as a conjuration⁵ of Black-togetherness through the body in rhythm and movement toward a unifying experience of an embodied collectivity. Through the current practice of this embodied tradition, the shouters uphold and share a recalling of the legacies of generational, cultural inheritances. Yes, groups that sustain the Ring Shout as “authentic” to the Gullah-Geechee culture are mostly Christian based in their religious affiliation. However, the very practice of assembling and traveling along the sacred circle goes deep into the cultural history of the various African peoples that are sources of the indigenous culture of the Gullah-Geechee, specifically, people of African descent from the West and West-Central African regions. I must account for the contributions of those Africans and their indigenous spiritual culture, as the Ring Shout bears witness to this crucial point.

The Ring Shout is an embodied ancestral inheritance, a tradition at the root level of African spirituality enabling through *intentional* physical presencing—a wielding of a Black-togetherness. In her seminal work *Mojo Working: The Old African American Hoodoo System*, Katrina Hazzard-Donald offers a comprehensive scope of the Ring Shout—its origin and evolution as a sacred spirituality of southern African Americans. I call upon Hazzard-Donald’s research as a major taproot by which the Ring Shout, for my specific focus, can find itself firmly planted in the soil/soul of the African diasporic spiritual reality. Hazzard-Donald states that in her research, she was encouraged to “re-examine the African American sacred dance ritual known as the Ring Shout and its function in the African American community, slave and free, in light of the historical old tradition black belt Hoodoo practice” (Hazzard-Donald 2013, 6). The theoretical contributions that I am most in gratitude for in her research are the articulation of the Ring Shout as a “sacred ritual dance,” and the utterance of “Hoodoo,” for which, in her writing, she makes two profound acknowledgments of the tradition. First, she states, “Hoodoo is the indigenous, herbal, healing, and supernatural-controlling spiritual folk tradition of the African American in the United States . . .” and second, “Hoodoo, for African Americans, is embodied historical memory linking them back through time to previous generations and ultimately to their African past” (Hazzard-Donald 2013, 4). These two assertions are rich in their capability to assist my contextualization of the Ring Shout as a conjuring of Black-togetherness due mainly to their viable presentation and the necessary connections of healing through embodied spirituality. The Ring Shout is not simply a tradition bound to a particular cultural group but a practice grounded and forged by a struggle for liberation. It was born within the traditional practices of West and West-Central African cultures through the bodies of those Africans stolen and transported to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade.

The transported Africans held the knowledge of the body as a medium and vessel of direct engagement with spiritual forces and the divine as a sacred epistemological ontology. Those Africans who survived the transatlantic slave trade cultivated this knowledge in their new lot in the American chattel system by reinventing their circle dances bound by rhythm and movement. For Africans prohibited in their enslavement from drumming and their various languages and songs, the body became the site for sustaining the ancestral connections considered essential to one’s survival.

Understanding the body as a site of resistance and remembrance became the active principle in the collective working to conjure a new Black-togetherness. This Black-togetherness is an activism of healing through the agency of ancestral veneration in the form of the dynamic sacred circle and the bodies engaged in the physical act of circling. On the function of the body and its significant purpose as knowledge, M. Jacqui Alexander asserts,

The purpose of the body is to act not simply, though importantly, as an encasement of the Soul, but also as a medium of spirit, the repository of a consciousness that derives from a source residing elsewhere, another ceremonial ritual marking. To this end, embodiment functions as a pathway to knowledge, a talking book, whose intelligibility relies on the social—the spiritual expertise of a community to decode Sacred knowledge... (Alexander 2005, 298)

Continuing from Alexander, the embodied enactment of the Ring Shout then can be envisaged as that “pathway to knowledge”—and in this instance, that perpetual recurring cycle of rounding toward ancestral recall[ing] and veneration as Black-togetherness conjured through the conscientious bodily force of unified clapping hands, shuffling feet, and vocalization as acts of remembrance and in many cases resistance.

As I continue my engagement with the Ring Shout as both a subject and object of research and curiosity, I become more keenly aware of its significance as a point of reactivation of my own ancestral recall[ing]. What I have to learn from the Ring Shout is something of the depths of its knowledge. It is through my continual engagement as an embodied researcher that I realize more points of access and articulations to explore. The exploration is an engagement with space and time and with the here and there as conceived through the manifestation of the Ring Shout as an ancestral veneration tradition. A tradition that moves through the lives of both the living and the dead, the here and there, for purposes of spiritual connectivity and consciousness. My experience is personal and professional, fueled and sustained by my artistic and scholarly drive and craft. My body as a site of memory and futuring, makes it possible to engage the ephemeral terrain of the Ring Shout in palpable and lasting ways through the conjuring of the embodied realities that I hold within cellular memory of my corporeality. This academic research pertains to me as it is my lifeblood and my cultural inheritance that I seek to retain, access, and utilize for myself and my community. Like the Senegambian griots (storytellers), who retain and convey the knowledge of familial histories and legacies, I align with such an order and embrace the possibility of this calling in relation to the Ring Shout, a spiritual tradition that makes belonging a tangible reality.

Part 1: Circling

Circles maintain a significant position interculturally. Within Africana traditions, the circle may function as a sacred space for individual and communal healing. The power of the circle is made clear in the mythical presence of the creator Iwa Damballah and Aida Wedo of the Haitian Vodou pantheon working collectively to stabilize the universe. From the traditional ancestral circle dances of West-Central Africa and its descendant, the African American Ring Shout, to Bantabas, prayer circles, and cyphers, the presence of the round holds great significance in the power of assembling for transcendent healing and Black-togetherness. “The majority of Africans brought to North America to be enslaved were from the central and western areas of Africa: [K]ongo-Angola, Nigeria, Dahomey, Togo, and the Gold Coast, and Sierra Leone. In these areas, an integral part of the religion and culture was in a ring during ceremonies honoring the ancestors” (White 2015, 48).

I am interested in the inherited technology of African descendants directly connected to the groups mentioned above, that of the Bakongo Cosmogram or Dikenga/Yowa. Referring to this ancient symbol in *The Four Moments of the Sun*, Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet write,

The Kongo cosmogram mirrors the birth of a person, in the rising of the sun; the maximal power in a vertical line which culminates with the sun at noon; the death and decline in the lowering of the sun and its disappearance beneath the sea or earth. Then, when the sun achieves its matching zenith (mbata) in the other world, the noon of the dead, it is midnight in our world.” (Thompson and Cornet 1981, 43)

Highlighting the significance of this cycle concerning the circle allows for a verification of the power of the individual. Fu-Kiau has written, “Man through his initiations follows the sun, because he himself is a second sun” (Thompson and Cornet 1981, 43). Like the sun that travels east to west in the sky, the bodies that substitute solar activity take the same journey or, as they, the “shouters,” travel along the terrestrial plane counterclockwise, creating a similar intangible *space* along their journey. That space now functions as an active field of potential activity. The sacred Ring Shout circle’s characteristic formation and foundation are a conduit (temporal) and vessel (spatial). As a conduit, the Ring Shout is characterized primarily by the flow of energy through the temporality of the conjured space made manifest by the traveling bodies. The energy can flow to and through individuals present and along the circle. In so doing, the space becomes a temporary container/vessel holding rhythm and time energy. The bodies in space are also vessels containing energy in constant motion, conducting and transmitting. It is the activation of these principles that set the stage for the articulation of the impending Black-togetherness. In similar group circling experiences, for example, within the context of counterclockwise movement around the *poto mitan*⁶ (central pole) of Haitian Vodou ritual ceremonies, the energy functions structurally and conductively. The energetic emanation from the bodies of the *vodouisant*⁷ maintains a kinesthetic palpability that function therapeutically in the context of the sacred space.

Yes, African peoples’ bodies have historically been subjected to violence in their casting as “objects” of bondage in the United States due mainly to the experience of the transatlantic slave trade. However, the bodies also function as conduits and vessels of cultivated knowledge. Nevertheless, this horrific experience does not eliminate the inherited knowledge; it requires a recalibration and refiguring so that it may manifest in new ways while maintaining a central function. Spiritual mediumship manifests as embodied knowledge via the intentional rhythm and movement in and around the circle. The stomping and shuffling of the feet, the clapping of the hands, and the emphatic vocalizing all contribute to stimulating and conjuring the openness necessary for the collective recuperation of the self and the group. Along the counterclockwise rotating circle, as unison movement occurs, the generated energy moves up and through the bodies, finally displaying the wonder of recall in the sensuous space of the void through a sublime movement articulation of various body parts.

Part 2: Black-Togetherness

Moving/dancing in unison affirms a sense of belonging, as can be witnessed through ancient traditions of global cultures that group dance as a communal affirming activity. In the group, one’s individuality is an element of force helping to propel toward a common goal. Like an aqueduct propelled by the continual influx of water carried long distances and supporting the community’s needs, the cyclical and simple act of breathing and moving together in a group generates profound force and connectivity. I suggest that Black sociocultural movements through time, resisting the rough terrain of inequality and injustice, greatly benefit from the inherited knowledge of embodiment as a powerful source of resistance toward positive societal change. The Ring Shout and the knowledge cultivated through its long-standing practice function as inheritable yet intangible wisdom. That knowledge of spiritual embodiment and generational inheritance is the soil from which wields the promise of justice sought through our times. We can bear witness to this practice through the generation of Black artists (dance and otherwise) who continue to source and affirm

the Ring Shout as a generational and cultural inheritance (Sharon Bridgeforth, Rashida Bumbray, Jonathan McCrory) by way of new artistic creations and experiences that center the phenomena of the Ring Shout. To situate the Ring Shout alongside social justice movements for Black liberation through history is to recognize the agency of its functioning, that of an assembling of Black-togetherness. Black Lives Matter, the Womanist Movement, Civil Rights Movement, Black Arts Movement, LGBTQ+, and others all share a seed that can certainly extend the conceptualization of the Ring Shout as a conscious act of “group movement” galvanizing both inscribed and ascribed codes of identity. It is the intention around affirmation through collective action. Beyond that, as an act of Black-togetherness, the Ring Shout has at its roots that essential foundation, movement: counterclockwise circular patterning, the shuffling and swaying of the body in the pattern, and all other physicalities that occur concerning the tradition.

Dancer, choreographer, community organizer, warrior, and “gitdiswardance” co-organizer Brittany L. Williams states, “There, is no social justice movement without movement” (2021). I apply Williams’s statement to the potentiality of the Ring Shout, as throughout history, in the US American South, it has had to fulfill the role of a tool of spiritual liberation and a communal healing space. The fundamental act of moving together, in unison, unidirectionally, and on the same accord is a root of social collectivism. Black-togetherness is a moment in time. A gathering moment when intention and attentiveness converge and *intentiveness* is born—when the experience of “chillaxin,” (as the late Bernie Mac would say) becomes more than simply sharing space, but a mindful reality of care potential. The regenerative moment created is a movement of rejuvenation, as during this assembly of Beings there exists the healing potential, caring, sustained through the presence and participation of the individual as one with the community.

The activation of conjuring occurs through the mediums of the body, the feet, the hands, and the voice. They sustain a centrality in the interplay between the visible and invisible realms of reality conjured in the Ring Shout. The rhythm and movement activate bodily changes of soul rejuvenation in and on the circle, which reminds us that the Black-togetherness is not simply about us here on the terrestrial plane of the living. Ultimately, the deceased, those of the ancestral plane, are those beckoned. Who they are/were and what they accomplished to enable sustained connectivity with them stand as the dynamic threshold for spiritual and emotional stability. Therefore, the intentiveness to the rhythm and movement of Black-togetherness in the Ring Shout must be honored and sacred as the potential benefits are critical to individual and group survival. In accounting for the temporal (rhythm) and spatial (circle) properties of the Ring Shout, I am considering the spiritual resonances of the tradition. These resonances transcend theology and tap into universal and collective knowledge.

There can be many reasons that people gather at one time and place while maintaining a range of differences. Nevertheless, the Ring Shout will conjure up a specific “unity” as a necessary function due not only to the cognitive rationale of the gathering but also to the physical practice that grounds and activates the Ring Shout—unison rhythm and movement. This process streamlines and focuses the group’s effort, conjuring up a unity that ultimately becomes the active ingredient, through a spiritual-psycho-physical functioning, toward the efficacy of the *calling* to the ancestors. The body, in its totality, is engaged in the functioning of the effort. Alternatively, as Christopher Johnson reminds us, “The black body is a site of sensuality that disseminates a moral message through movement. The black body acts as a medium, a means of transmission, a conduit or pathway” (Johnson 2020, 16–17). At this juncture, the efficacy of the Ring Shout resides in its active and intentional articulation and wielding of the embodied knowledge and wisdom of the participants that makes manifest the intangible reality of the spirit (energy) of Black-togetherness. Therefore, regarding the unjust prohibition of the African drum in the Americas, essentially the United States, the question remains: How did the enslaved Africans remember the rhythm? The need to manifest rhythm conjured up an alternate solution. Their bodies became the drum and their movements the rhythm. So, the enslaved Africans clapped their hands, slapped their bodies, beat broomsticks upon wooden floors, and stomped their bare and shod feet upon the earth. The rhythm

exploded from within. The *beat* remained necessary, and as long as there was a heartbeat to connect to, there was a rhythm to experience.

Nevertheless, even before the forced transportation of enslaved Africans, there was a cultural practice of embodying the rhythm, manifesting the spirit of the drum (heart) in their movement traditions. Though the “loss” of the drum was significant, the beat was never lost. Therefore, through this common breath, we find a belonging by how each contribution makes a tangible outcome. Traditional African culture holds the drum as a sacred object that must be revered, even fed,⁸ teaches us that the drum is like the heartbeat, and out of that drumbeat is the rhythm of life. That principle extends from the primacy of the drum, and the rhythm, to the cultures of Africa, creating a seamless relationship between the earth, the body, and rhythm. I do not aim to support past pejoratives regarding the “natural” propensity for rhythm by Black people. However, we must affirm that cultural knowledge/wisdom, cultivated by African civilizations for millennia, is a centralizing and unifying force in one’s relationship to living. Further, this acknowledges embodied knowledge as a viable epistemology within the populations of those who maintain and sustain such knowledge.

Part 3: Ancestral Recall[ing]

“Sound waves are a type of energy that’s released when an object vibrates. Those acoustic waves travel from their source through air or another medium, and when they come into contact with our eardrums, our brains translate the pressure waves into words, music, or signals we can understand” (Hawkins 2023). As sound waves move through space in varying frequencies, those frequencies make contact through the ear canal and with the physical body, initiating various responses. One of the responses involves the generated neurons (electrical impulses) within and through the body from various stimuli. These electrical impulses emit information through the body and to the brain. The brain then responds to these impulses in kind with a reaction. In ancestral knowledge, the stimulus is a sound or image functioning as a tool for instigating encoded memory, the memory of ancestry—that same ancestral recall[ing] that aTunde Adjuah calls forth via the tones and pitches of his trumpet and compositions. Within the physiological functioning of the brain, that impulse that stimulates memory is the only neural signal that does not travel to the brain core but to the hippocampus. This electrical impulse travels directly to the hippocampus triggering memory. Relatedly, the rhythmic patterns that accompany the various “talking drum” styles of Nigeria, Ghana, and Senegal are ancient stimulus methods. These drumming patterns recreate the vocal patterns of the various languages causing direct communication between, for example, the dancer and the rhythm. This correlation, as witnessed in Gelede⁹ masquerades of the Yoruba ethnic group, creates a seamless connection between the performed steps and the musician(s) rhythms. Each rhythm is connected to a particular physical pattern that the dancer is trained to hear and perform. This relation of rhythm and movement can also be witnessed in the dance and drum tradition of the Asante ethnic group of Ghana’s Kete and Adowa dances. However, what happens when those people are no longer directly related to their indigenous cultural traditions, when they have been displaced and dispersed to other geographies, and their cultural practices outlawed? Anthropologist Yvonne Daniel’s offering of “disembodied knowledge”—the “intellectual knowledge without concomitant integration of somatic, intuitive understanding and the spiritual wisdom their combination yields”—can explain the resulting state of reality for such a “social paradigm” (Daniel 2005, 91–92).

Daniel resolves this tension by reminding us: “Many Africans in the Americas and their descendants did not entirely forget their multiple African heritages. They resisted the mainstream education and miseducation by means of distinctive forms of dance, drumming and singing, which alluded to and reinforced characteristic interests, propensities, and values from their African heritages” (91–92). She continues, “The total wisdom within African American chanting, drumming, and dancing can be viewed as an accumulation and transposition of many kinds of knowledge. African-derived performance is easily a transposing of philosophy, religion, or belief as well as

natural, technological, and social sciences into the aesthetic and artistic arena or primarily nonverbal, communicative forms” (91–92).

In my personal and professional work with AfrOist spirituality and African dance, these notions of remembering and of recalling have been palpable as acts of accumulation and transposition, as identified by Daniel above. As it applies to my concern regarding the ancestral memory of African descendants of the Americas, to what extent can one come to comprehend ancestral memory and access to such memory through the work of various African traditions, including those culture bearers, priests and priestesses, master drummers and singers, and dancers? Though access to a portion of this knowledge may be protected largely because of vows of secrecy within the various traditions, many lay people engage in this process of accessing ancestral knowledge regularly and perhaps unknowingly. It could be one’s preference for a dance style, how a drummer plays a particular drum, or one’s interest in the various visual or sonic patterns regularly encountered; this is all material of the subconscious, in which so many of these memories lie dormant. For me, it has been coming into contact and falling in love with the drum and dance culture of the Djola ethnic group of Senegal and Guinea-Bissau, only to discover many years later that my maternal (X chromosome) ancestral DNA derives from a female ancestor of the Djola ethnic group. The body remembered. Though for me, I was not conscious of the underlying draw. Perhaps a memory of a rhythmic pattern that my (deep) body recalled and had stored in the recesses of my subconscious was like a fire awaiting a rekindling. In my travel to Casamance,¹⁰ Senegal, in the winter of 2019, that flame was finally fully rekindled. During this journey, a form of “Black-togetherness” showed up for me in prayer, ritual/performance, and masquerade. I was affirmed. My rhythm was affirmed.

During a ceremony at a local elementary school in the area, where our host was delivering goods and products that had been sent from the United States, it was identified that my maternal ancestry derived from a female Djola ancestor. Upon receiving the information that I was a descendant of the Djola, and was on the trip to make a spiritual connection, the community of Thionck-Essyl responded in kind with a challenge. The female leader of a women’s cultural group announced to the group, “If he is from here, we will know when he dances.” The rhythm was played, and my now close friend, a local of the area, informed me of what was communicated and insisted that I dance. The traditional dance indigenous to the area, enyalinyi (spelled phonetically), was a dance that I have studied for many years through my engagement with various teachers and choreography, namely under the guidance of KanKouran West African Dance Company’s artistic director, Assane Konte. Therefore, it was not unfamiliar to me. The difference was that I was on the native grounds of the people from whom this dance derived and to which it belonged. With a slight sense of fear and insecurity, I bravely stepped over to where I was being guided to dance, and I danced. It was less than a minute before a local male from the area jumped past others in the community and moved me slightly out of the way, in order that he could dance. I received that as an affirmation, and I simply rejoined the dance. The woman’s group leader came back to me and my friend, and requested that I sit down on the ground and face the large group of seated women, men, and children. The women began to pray over me. My friend knelt down and began translating the prayers and affirmations in my ear. Once finished, I was helped up from the ground, as I was so overwhelmed with emotion, taken back to my seat, and the ceremony continued. As I sat, many of the community members looked at me differently, some asked my name, and, mostly the children, huddled up around and touched me inquisitively. I felt that I had been accepted and welcomed into a community. I had been welcomed back into an ancestral circle. The welcoming that occurred, though not as a formal Ring Shout, provided for me a phenomenological experience of embodied knowing processed through a metaphorical *ring* by which those present bore witness to a reconnection of the self, the body, and the spirit. In that moment of dancing on those grounds, I had the intense fulfillment of bodily remembering; I was allowed to show myself. The next day, in what I understood was to be a music and dance performance of the women’s cultural group, I was asked to be a part of the performance. The performance, or what I thought was to be a performance, transformed into a ritual in which my participation was the central focus. I became the

sole beneficiary of blessings bestowed upon me by the women of the community. The rhythm of a single large conical-shaped wooden drum, played by one of the women, was accompanied by hand-held metal plates that were played by each of the other dancing women. After they performed their choreographed patterning, which included a series of circular and linear formations, they brought me into the group. I followed the leader, unknowing as to what more was expected, and was eventually sat down on the ground as the women continued to circle. Once the women stopped, there commenced a series of actions upon my body, which I recognized and accepted as a kind of spiritual cleansing. I sat astonished and received the blessings, some of which I could understand from what was being translated, others for which I depended merely on intuition. I did not allow my growing anxiety to block what I felt was a spiritual experience many generations in the making.

Part 4: Conjuring

Nurturing the space of rhythm and movement yields a significant return—the powerful manifestation of cultivated spirit. As the Herero¹¹ of Namibia regards, this spirit is the fire that must remain aflame in recognition of the ancestral forces (fire) within. As the Yoruba believe, through the wisdom of Ifá,¹² we are all reincarnated from previous ancestral spirits that existed before us. Therefore, the connection that is being made via the bodily effort of reanimated life force is through the ancestors to the Supreme Being, again and again, repetitively, until which time the process of *atunwa*¹³ has “run its course.” Therefore, rhythm and movement in the form of the Ring Shout, as a repetitive, circular act toward deep individual and communal connectivity, is reaffirmed and reified as a conjured assembly of Black-togetherness. In its mode, it aligns with the happenings of the universe while simultaneously and profoundly adhering to earthly mundanity, traveling counterclockwise, feet shuffling along the ground, legs uncrossed with hands that clap, bodies that sway and rock, voices that call and respond, and rhythms and movements that repeat with intensification in a kind of Welshian¹⁴ practicality toward a spiritual elevation. Theologian Bryson C. M. White has written that the Ring Shout has lost its primary function of ancestral veneration. In his essay titled “Death of the Ring Shout: African American Ancestor Veneration, Africana Theology and George Washington,” White contends, “Owing to the quest to be human in the eyes of a society where humanity is defined by Whiteness, the Black Church within the United States has been overly influenced by the Western critique of African ancestor veneration as ‘other’ and become estranged from this powerful communal binding tool” (White 2015, 45). I am inclined to agree with White. However, I suggest that, despite the explicit presence of the tradition of ancestral veneration within the form of the Ring Shout, there remains a viable alternative achieved via the properties and physicalities of the act itself that stands as a form of veneration. The very enacting of the various relevant properties of the Ring Shout (the circle, repetitive circling, singing/shouting, clapping, stomping) suggests an ancestral recall[ing] that is viable and useful in the lives of those present, due mainly to the reality that the bodily movements performed are identical to the bodily movements of the past. That recall is activated through the physicality, the contact with the earth calling up through tactile impact the memories of those who have made this action before and whose *blood memories* remain present in the bodies that circle today. This phenomenological element of the shout must be remembered and noticed as it contains the force of the *magic*. It is not only what is expressed through the voice, though I include the voice as a bodily experience, but how the corporeal creates efficacy through the form. Let it not be forgotten that many indigenous African rites performed by various ethnic groups align with and center the dancing body as a critical element in its success as a ritual. The dynamic physicality that characterizes the Ring Shout is a significant link in a historical chain that centers the body, movement/dance, bringing into relevance the wholistic and integrated participation of the body, mind, and soul/spirit, as Daniel has reminded us through her assertion of embodied knowledge.

We should accept a reality that affirms the body’s expressive and intellectual capabilities as a mediator between the past and the present and as a constructor of space and time through movement (dance)

and vibration (sound, rhythm). What is being constructed is the *magic well*, where Black bodies make memory manifest. From the intangible and psychic space of the magic well rises the palpable energy of remembrance and connectivity, driving and moving bodies to an alternate dimension. Through the construction of this magic well, there is a creation of *mind-space* that all participants present can share and communicate. The shared mind-space is that which mirrors the cosmic web—the great network or universe to which all humanity is connected and can access through specific activities. It is commonly acknowledged through the somatic traditions of various world cultures that there are energy points throughout the body, with nerve endings in the feet and the hands, that directly connect to various body organs, and those organs contribute to or control the main functions of the human body. All of this, in addition to the neural functioning of the body, relates to the connectivity between the physical and spiritual bodies, upon which memory depends. Therefore, the mind-space that I am addressing is that space that is accessed through the integrated functioning of the body in rhythm (time) and movement (space). I am suggesting that the ancestral veneration thought to have been lost is not lost at all. The ancestral veneration has been relegated to the activity of the dancing body. Therefore, if it is to be recuperated, it has to be through the effort of expanding an allowance for dance to occur in places and spaces where the presence of dance may be considered an affront to the sanctity of that place. Further, where White suggests that by redirecting liturgy, recuperation can occur, I assert that the presence of the dancing body and its function as a mechanism of spiritual articulation and energetic activation is how the veneration of the ancestors can make a resurgence into the institutionalized spiritual lives of those for whom White addresses. Additionally, reasserting a space for the sacred circle, a literal making enough room for the shout circle, as in the Gullah-Geechee praise houses, will create an opening for the “recuperation” of the Ring Shout as an ancestral veneration practice and technology within the Black church.

Though the Ring Shout tradition, within its Christian context, is considered more explicitly as religious worship than “dance,” with rigid parameters regarding the lifting and crossing of the legs for the maintaining of its sanctity, if we comprehend dance not only from a religious context, connected to Western hegemony but from a spiritual praxis, having to do with a relationship and alignment with the energy of nature and movement as a cosmological activity, then there can be more allowance with how dance can be regarded even within the realm of the sacred. Therefore, dance has the powerful potential to cross boundaries and skew the expectation of those who engage and participate in it as a function and of living. I am convinced that the work of dance, which is the labor of people in their most expressive and elevated state, can do the work of providing a space where this vital human activity can transcend the boundaries of religion to reveal a more fundamental need that exists at the core of all people who engage.

Through the bodily act of repetitive counterclockwise circling, singing/shouting, clapping, and stomping, the Ring Shout, a spiritual technology and cultural phenomenon bound to African ancestry, offers a clear path to a Black-togetherness as an act of assembly. This assembly is a conjured manifestation of the spiritual possibilities of Black-beingness in dance, and in this “dance,” the communal, conscious, and venerative efforts function as a grounding point in the goal of “being with dance” as an orientation toward well-being and wholeness.

Through my various engagements with the Ring Shout, I have come to realize that the calling is a multipronged proposition. To know the Ring Shout as an embodied experience in which my body can viscerally engage in the various phenomena is just one layer of participation. Engaging the theoretical components of the Ring Shout, through the viewing and reading of various sources, offers a cognitive comprehension that activates a broadening of what it means to introduce, sustain, and share the knowledge within various academic and artistic arenas. Finally, the Ring Shout as a spiritual phenomenon of ancestral inheritance, heightens my respect for the viability of embodied knowledge as central to the continuity of AfrOist cultural modes. The body, its faculties and capacities, must not be removed from the experience of knowing, as it is through bodily engagement that we become aware and sensitive to those for whom we are connected, past, present, future. Through

the assembly of our bodily totality (body, mind, soul), individually and communally, we affirm the force that is MOVEMENT. Let us know that power and receive its reward. “Let the circle be unbrotken” (Tungane pamoja tutafute nia) (Richards 1990, 292).

Today I Give Thanks
I give thanks for the earth that I stand upon
I give thanks to my folks that made me
I give thanks to the spirits who carry me
Today I give thanks

I give thanks to the water that nurtures me
I give thanks for my body
I give thanks to my family who supports me
Today I give thanks

I give thanks to the fire that fortifies me
I give thanks for my soul
I give thanks to friends who love me
Today I give thanks

I give thanks to the air that animates me
I give thanks for my mind
I give thanks to my beloveds who believe in me
Today I give thanks
Today I give thanks
Today I give thanks.¹⁵

Notes

1. During the beginning process of writing, I channeled this invocation. This is an original text inspired by the concept of repetition and rhythm.

2. “The Collegium for African Diaspora Dance (CADD) is an egalitarian community of scholars and artists committed to exploring, promoting, and engaging African diaspora dance as a resource and method of aesthetic identity. Through conferences, roundtables, publications, and public events, we facilitate interdisciplinary inquiry that captures the variety of topics, approaches, and methods that might constitute Black Dance Studies. CADD was conceptualized by its founding members and first convened in April 2012 as the African Diaspora Dance Research Group at Duke University.” <https://www.cadd-online.org/>.

3. A traditional performance group of coastal Georgia. McIntosh County Shouters have been performing in public since 1980. They have been practicing the Ring Shout since the eighteenth century. This age-old tradition has been passed down from generation to generation in this family since their ancestors arrived in bondage over three hundred years ago. <https://mcintoshcountyshouters.com/about-mcintosh-county-shouters/>.

4. *Haint*: a type of ghost or evil spirit that originated in the beliefs and customs of the Gullah Geechee people, descendants of enslaved Africans who live predominantly in the Low Country and on the barrier islands off the coast of the Carolinas, Georgia, and north Florida.

5. I employ this term to foreground the AfrOist sacred practice of energizing the invisible realm through an embodied orality toward a particular therapeutic outcome and/or resolution of matters for an individual or a community.

6. *Poto mitan*: a central “pole” that functions as a conduit through which spirits travel from the ethereal to the terrestrial plane in the Haitian Vodou Hounfort. It can also be conceived as the supportive structure between the heavens and the earth, with human life existing in between.

7. Haitian Creole term for a Vodou devotee.

8. Various African-based spiritual traditions call for the occasional “feeding” of liquids and food to the drums as a rite of initiation.
9. Gelede masquerades were, and still are, staged in Yoruba villages and towns to pay homage to women—mainly elderly women—for the community to benefit from their special spiritual powers, which were believed to be equal to or greater than that of the gods and ancestors.
10. The southern region of Senegal that is traditionally the home territory of the Djola ethnic group.
11. Herero: a Bantu ethnic group inhabiting parts of Southern African geography.
12. A spiritual tradition that derives from the Yorubaland of Nigeria. Ifá also refers to the divination tradition of the same people based in the literary corpus of Odu Ifá.
13. The Yoruba concept of reincarnation.
14. Through an Umfundalai philosophy, progenitor Dr. Kariamuwelsh establishes repetition as an intensification rather than the simple act of repeating a movement (Asante and Asante 1990).
15. A final evocation of gratitude to the forces of nature that work in and through me as evidence of my connection to the universal energies conjured through the Ring Shout.

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