

Baba to Sons: Chuck Davis Choreographs His Legacy with *Paths*

By Stafford C. Berry, Jr. and C. Kemal Nance

I. An Introduction

In an intense weekend rehearsal in October, 2011, Chuck Davis, Artistic Director of the African American Dance Ensemble (AADE) and creator of *DanceAfrica* America, mounted *Paths* on the Berry and Nance Dance Project (B&NDP). Stafford C. Berry, Jr. and I, C. Kemal Nance, comprise the B&NDP, a duo of African American men who present dances about African American maleness. Moved by the sight of Davis's strong and aging body and inspired by his tireless years of championing African Dance in this country, we approached Davis about creating a new work while Berry and I were performing with AADE at the annual Independence Day Eno River Festival in Durham, North Carolina. With wide-eyed enthusiasm, Davis agreed to choreograph a dance on our bodies because it gave him an opportunity to develop a high level of artistry that his current cast of dancers was unable to physically achieve. Davis boldly pronounced, "You two can do everything! There are no limits!" He later called this work *Paths*. We saw this as an opportunity for Chuck Davis to choreograph his legacy. As mature dancers ourselves, 42 and 41 respectively, and boundless as Davis asserts, we appreciate the temporality of our own dancing bodies and the sanctity of the choreographic offerings our shared mentor, Davis, or Baba¹ as we affectionately refer to him, can provide. The following bibliographic / historical outline supports his significance to our research:

Baba Chuck Davis is an American choreographer born on January 1, 1937, in Raleigh, North Carolina. He saw the Sierra Leone National Dance Company at the 1964 New York World's Fair² and decided, at that moment, that he would visit Africa one day. He attended Howard University 1966-68, majoring in Theater and Dance. Standing 6'6", an "unusual" height for a dancer, the young Baba Chuck took a master dance class with Geoffrey Holder, a professional dancer from Trinidad who stood 6'8", 2 inches taller. Holder encouraged him to make use of the height and stretch his long arms afforded him rather than shrink into himself when he danced. He worked with Michael Babatunde Olatunji's Dance Company³, Eleo Pomare's Dance Troupe⁴, and the Bernice Johnson Dance Company⁵ until he formed his own company, the Chuck Davis Dance Company (CDDC) in 1967. Credited with being one of the first New York City companies to use the

¹ *Baba* is West African term that means 'father'. In the African dance communities in the United States it is an honorific title designated for male elders.

² As of January 9th, 2011 Wikipedia lists on its Website: A world's fair is a large public exhibition. These exhibitions vary in character and are held in varying parts of the world. The 1964/1965 New York World's Fair was the third major world's fair to be held in New York City. Hailing itself as a "universal and international" exposition, the fair's theme was "Peace Through Understanding," dedicated to "Man's Achievement on a Shrinking Globe in an Expanding Universe.

³ Michael Babatunde Olatunji was an early pioneer of African music and Dance in the US, recording one of the first African drum and song albums.

⁴ Eleo Pomare Eleo Pomare, was a modern-dance choreographer known for choreographing angry social-protest pieces about the human condition and the plight of blacks in particular.

⁵ Bernice Johnson's Dance School in Jamaica NY, was a historical community organization which educated many well known dance artists.

traditional West African Djembe drum in performance, CDDC gained a reputation for their one-half African and one-half Moderne offerings. Baba Chuck joined the faculty of the American Dance Festival⁶ in 1974, and then founded DanceAfrica in 1977. Dance Africa is the greatest showcase venue of African and African Diasporan dance in America. It boasts appearances, in Hartford, CT, Minneapolis, MN, Los Angeles, CA, Philadelphia, PA, Miami, FL, and Columbus, OH, with annual appearances in NYC, Chicago, Washington DC, and Dallas, TX. Also in 1977, CDDC was selected to represent the Eastern United States at an international dance festival in Africa called FESTAC. In the early eighties Baba Chuck organized the Cultural Arts Safari, an annual pilgrimage to Africa for educators and seekers of African culture. In 1983 he started a second dance company, the African American Dance Ensemble. Included in Baba Chuck's continuous honors and awards is his '2000 distinction as one of the First 100 Irreplaceable Dance Treasures in the United States by The Dance Heritage Coalition. Baba Chuck Davis turned 75 on January 1st, 2012. To that end, we seized the chance to have Baba's artistic genius live on in our bodies.

The synchronized histories of the B&NDP and Baba Chuck Davis can be characterized as a father/son relationship with Baba Chuck Davis. I met Baba while attending Swarthmore College. My attendance in Baba's master class in 1991 led to my travelling with him to Gambia, West Africa, for research for my undergraduate thesis. Stafford met Baba that same year in a Master class at Temple University. In 1997, Stafford and I, both members of the Kariamum & Company: Traditions (K&C), a Philadelphia-based, contemporary African dance company, performed with AADE at the American Dance Festival in Durham, North Carolina. Kariamum Welsh, K & C's Artistic Director and another shared mentor of ours, mounted a contemporary, Zimbabwean inspired work on AADE and sent us to North Carolina to perform with the company. In September of that year, Baba hired Stafford to be the Assistant to the Artistic Director for the AADE, while I remained in Philadelphia in a congruent position in K&C. In the years that followed, Stafford and I performed as a duo in selected AADE & K&C performances. In 2003, our respective companies performed together in a gala production at Swarthmore College called the Generations Project. The Generations Project was a series of master classes, panel discussions, and concerts that celebrated the interconnected African dance legacies that Baba Chuck Davis and Mama Kariamum Welsh share and acknowledged Stafford's and my choreography and performances under their tutelage as the continuation of their life's work. Throughout the years, Baba, Stafford, and I have danced circuitously in and out of each other's professional and personal lives, affording us a unique subjectivity that empowers us to participate in and critically observe our own discourse. Our congruent experiences in performing and mounting work for AADE and K&C respectively, and in producing our own collaborative work as featured performers for both companies, have facilitated critical feedback that that encouraged our systematic reflection and examination of our agency as both directors and performers.

Baba to Sons is an autoethnography that not only chronicles the act of making dance with Baba Chuck Davis but also unpacks our collective discourse as African American dancing men who

⁶ The American Dance Festival is a education and performance venue for modern dance in America with roots at Connecticut College and currently residing in Durham, North Carolina.

employ African dance vocabularies for our creative and scholarly work. In this particular project, we sought to uncover what Chuck Davis deemed as important for the sustainment of African dance culture in the United States and the special instructions he had for us as African American dancing men and the keepers of these traditions. We posit our subjectivity as dancers and researchers in *Paths* as a potential paradigm for the perpetuation of an African American dance culture. In doing so, our analysis of Baba's creative process and our participation in that underscores the intersection of cultural permanence and gendered scripting. In much the same way we choreograph, we write this article in two voices, each of us narrating each section while including the comments and the critical analysis of the other. Emanating from a 26-year old, symbiotic friendship and concurrent dance partnership, *Baba to Sons* recognizes our individual voices as they punctuate our bond that exists in, is supported by, and is perpetuated by our dance.

II. Method and Methodology

An autoethnography methodology illuminates the linkages between our dancing *Paths* and our shared discourse as African American dancing men. As we make our concurrent forays in academia, we use the writing of this article as a mode of inquiry to deepen our understanding of ourselves so as to further analyze the culture of the specialized field in which we are situated.⁷

At the outset of our two-day rehearsal period, we interviewed Baba. Our purpose was to get him to articulate his choreographic intentions in light of what we viewed as an evolving African dance tradition in the United States. While I recorded the interview with a digital voice recorder and posed the questions, Stafford filmed Baba with a digital camera. Some of the footage from the interview will be shown before the dance is premiered at Swarthmore College in February.

Midway through the first day of the rehearsal process, both Stafford and I wrote our individual field notes, often chatting about some of the poignant moments in the dance while theorizing their connection to the interview. I wrote many of these notes as episodes with particular attention to lived experienced description,⁸ while Stafford recorded other details and logistics of the project.

On the second day of rehearsal, Stafford and I interviewed Baba again, asking him to re-visit some of the issues from the initial interview and to comment on the progress of his choreographic intent. Most importantly, we asked him to describe *Paths* in light of his contentions about African dance performance. After we finished the dance over the two-day rehearsal period and after my departure, Stafford interviewed Baba a final time. This improvised round of questions attempted to "pin down" a codification of African dance in America as an evolving form.

Our last method of inquiry is the writing of our stories. Laurel Richardson suggests that qualitative researchers write about the writing process to contextualize their work. These *writing*

⁷ Laurel Richards, "Writing: A Method of Inquiry," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research* ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln et. al. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publication Inc., 2000), 924.

⁸ Maxx van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

stories, as she coins them, “reminds us of the continual co-creation of the self and social science.”⁹ Stafford’s and my writing story is analogous to our collaborative artistic process. In the aforementioned Generations Project (2003), Berry and I co-choreographed a work featuring a combined cast of AADE and K&C dancers called *Thin Lines*. Once we agreed on the theme of the work we, separately, developed movement sequences that honored our developing narrative. Once we developed our individual phrases, we taught them to each other, sharing critical feedback about each other’s work, offering transitions between phrases, and identifying motifs. We taught each other’s work to the dancers and in so doing, made artistic revisions that included casting, spacing, and costuming. Then, there were isolated, inspired moments during the creative process when we choreographed together at the same time. *Thin Lines* is a metaphor for our *writing story*. While Stafford and I each wrote our own sections of this essay, we read each other’s sections, often discussing with the other how we were impacted by the written texts. These conversations led to revisions of our own sections and each other’s sections and more discussions that allowed us to deepen our mutual understanding and to “choreowrite” this text. We organized our essay by providing a detailed description of the dance and its respective choreographic process, an exploration of gendered scripting via a selected review of literature, analysis of a final interview with Baba Chuck, and finally, our conclusive remarks.

III. Paths: The Dance

The following section is a lived experience description of our dancing Paths in the dance studio of the Durham Arts Council in Durham, NC on October 16, 2011.

We enter the space from the upstage right corner walking on the diagonal of the space side by side with our shoulders touching. I, 6’ 3” 220 pounds with a muscular build, bald head, and a milk chocolate complexion walk facing the audience while Stafford, 6’ 5” 210 pounds, cinnamon brown complexion with long dark brown locks that drape down to the middle of his back, walks facing the back. Together we sweep the stage with our long strides switching position back to front sporadically and simultaneously. As we walk this circular path while alternately extending our arms to the side and above our heads, the melodic sound of the *kora*¹⁰ fills the space. We walk a circular path, alternately extending our arms up from our sides, above our heads, then down in front of our bodies. We stop and start; we break away from each other lapsing into traditional West African and modern dance vocabularies. With long legs and high knees, we dance the signature marching movement of the *Down Down Ba*, a “dance of the strong man” originating in Guinea, West Africa. I roll to the floor, then Stafford descends in a stretch as I run to lift him up from the floor to resume the *Down Down Ba*. Our walks become runs and leaps as we separate from each other, each dancing a customized series of walks, jumps, quick and percussive *Mendiane*¹¹ leg stretches and deliberate high

⁹ Laurel Richardson, “Writing as Inquiry,” 943.

¹⁰ The *kora* is a 21-stringed West African instrument made with a long wooden stick as the neck and a gourd as the resonating chamber.

¹¹ *Mendiane* is a harvest dance that originate from the Malian Empire. While *Mendiane* comprises several movements, it is best identified by its leg stretches, which are done with the body close to the earth.

knee and hip-twisting *Sabar*¹² movements. As we dance in concert with the sound of the *koru*, Baba Chucks' ominous voice recites words to Max Erhman's *Desiderata*.

Go placidly amidst the noise and haste, and remember what peace there may be in silence.

As far as possible, without surrender, be on good terms with all persons.

Speak your truth quietly and clearly; and listen to others,

Even to the dull and ignorant; they too have their story.

Avoid loud and aggressive persons; they are vexatious to the spirit.

If you compare yourself with others, you may become vain or bitter.

For always there will be greater and lesser persons than yourself.

Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans.

Keep interested in your own career, however humble; it is real possession in the changing fortunes of time.

Exercise caution in your business affairs, for the world is full of trickery

But let this not blind you to what virtue there is;

Many persons strive for high ideals and everywhere life is full of heroism.

Be yourself. Especially do not feign affection.

Neither be cynical about love, for in the face of aridity and disenchantment, it is as perennial as the grass.

Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth.

Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune.

But do not distress yourself with dark imaginings.

Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness

Beyond a wholesome discipline, be gentle with yourself.

You are a child of the universe

No less than the trees and the stars;

You have a right to be here.

And whether or not it is clear to you,

No doubt the universe is unfolding as it should.

Therefore be at peace with God, whatever you conceive Him to be.

And whatever your labors and aspirations, in the noisy confusion of life,

Keep peace in your soul.

With all its sham, drudgery, and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.

Be cheerful. Strive to be happy.

As his narration ends, Stafford and I walk to the center stage and present ourselves with our long arms extended to the audience and smiles that welcome imagined on-lookers into our world. This is

¹² *Sabar* is traditional African dance from the Senegal region of West Africa, it is characterized by its rapid knee lifts twisting hips, and flirtatious performance style.

the only moment in the dance when our gazes invite. Upon this final gesture, the music decrescendos as we gallantly take our bows in an assumed black out.

IV. Africa by Design: Baba Chuck's Process

I (Stafford Berry) enter this discourse as a male dancer who has danced with Baba Chuck Davis as a touring member of his company for 15 years. It is from my lived experience as Baba's protégé that I have gained an embodied understanding of his (choreographic) process. As a muse of his work, I have gleaned that there are two basic kinds of works that determine his approach to dance-making. When he choreographs traditional-based work - dances that employ pre-colonialized movement aesthetics or are reconstructed to emulate the indigenous dance practices of ancient, continental African societies - he emphasizes rhythm in the crafting of the work. However, when he makes contemporary (African) work - dances that blend modern idioms and ideas with African vocabulary or engage and abstract African movement vocabularies to construct a social narrative - he employs a counting system along with the emphasis on rhythm to render his work. The following is a basic account and analysis of Baba Chuck's choreographic process for *Paths*.

The Concept. Baba talked to us about his ideas and his intended use of Max Erhman's "Desiderata". Baba states:

"We are endowed with 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 personalities, and we can be on one path going in one direction but the spirit and the mind can be on another. This piece is a bout *Paths* – the different *Paths* in life. The 'Desiderata' reminds us that we must be very responsible to self and to understand that no matter what 'runs down' in life, as long as we are aware, that we can deal with it."¹³

Often, Baba Chuck will begin with a musical, philosophical, or movement motif and build a dance around it. In making many of his dances, including *Paths*, he already knows the choreographic intent before engaging dancers' bodies and other elements of production. For me, the concept and movement motifs reminded me of the *Yin and Yang*.¹⁴

The Beginning and the End. Baba Chuck started the movement-making process by working with Kemal and me on the initial walking motif.

I find it very interesting that the very first movement in the choreographic process is still the beginning of the dance (at least thus far). Most notable dance makers will create the beginning of the dance somewhere else in the process. Because this rarely happens in dance, it suggests that Baba Chuck had been thinking about the choreography for a while (it's difficult to say how long that is).

¹³ Chuck Davis, interviewed by Stafford Berry, Jr. and C. Kemal Nance, tape recording, 16 October, 2011, Durham Arts Council, Durham, NC.

¹⁴ As of January 15, 2012 Wikipedia lists on its Website: The symbol (Yin-Yang) "yin and yang", is used to describe how polar opposites or seemingly contrary forces are interconnected and interdependent in the natural world, and how they give rise to each other in turn. Opposites thus only exist in relation to each other.

Choreographic (or Rhythmic) Scaffolding. These are the interconnected details that provide the foundation for *Paths* and represent Baba Chuck's process with contemporary African work. In a very commanding voice he counts from one to eight, snapping loudly with his fingers on each count. These eight beats represent one (dance) measure. By the time the end of *Paths* is reached, 62 measures have passed. At first encounter, this counting system was, admittedly, frustrating because it seemed to interrupt the previous way with which I encountered movement (Mama Kariam, for example, typically choreographed to vocal rhythms). But after years of contending with and embodying the system, and after analysis in this research process, I have realized its worth.

Each measure references "Place" by revealing at least four important pieces of information: (1) the movement being engaged or initiated (sometimes general and sometimes specific), (2) location – where the dancer(s) (or any else) is in the space, (3) time – where the dancer(s) is in the scope of the entire dance, and (4) value – ideas imposed by from performer or choreographer about the state of mind, emotion, and body you're in at any given measure.

Each measure references tempo in the dance. In *Paths* there is a "Medium Paced Tempo" (as opposed to a fast paced or very slow tempo).

Each measure may reference "(Un)counted Polyrythms." These are quicker-tempo or staccato rhythms within a measure. It is during these occasions that Baba stops the verbal counting in order to "sing" these quicker-tempo polyrythms. Extended polyrythms (movements) may grow past or beyond the end of a given measure but are eventually folded back into the structure once the counting is re-initiated from measure *one* (or a previous measure where the count is known).

Admittedly, it is a little challenging to sense or visualize the details of Baba Chuck's Choreographic Scaffolding without a method of mapping – either visual or embodied. For me, it is next to genius to choreograph with a counting system that holds movement, location, time, and value as a process for dance-making. Kemal and I take the "value" portion a step further in our process by personifying specific dance measures. This personification, typically initiated by gest, deepens the value given to the measure. For example, we reference the 37th dance measure by saying, "Miss 37!!! She's unrelenting!"

Dashes of Tradition. "Nigeria!" Baba Chuck called out the name of this West African country and proceeded to demonstrate the traditional Nigerian movement he wanted us to engage. "*Down Down Ba!*" He called out the name of this "dance of the strong man," or "big drum," to implore us to use our knowledge of this dance and imbue the movement with the style and strength for which it is known. "Hinge!" As he worked with me on a solo part, he instructed me to hinge to the floor, then he gestured with his body in such a way that it imparted to me that he was after a classical modern dance hinge¹⁵.

Incorporating Poetry. *Desiderata* by Mark Erhman was a predetermined part of the process and product. Because Baba Chuck was inspired by the poem, he read it to us before we started learning the movement as a way to help convey what he was seeking in the process and the work. The poetry was added as performance, chronologically, after the movement was created. In Baba Chuck's reading of the poem he follows the dance intently to coordinate key words or phrases during particular movements or sections of the dance.

¹⁵ A hinge is a movement from the Lester Horton Technique as practiced by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre which requires one bend the knees and lower the body to the earth while facing the sky.

I wonder if Baba has ever choreographed to this poem in the past. He often does that; he has re-choreographed many dances over. They are the same in them, but they are never the same dance.

The Music/Musician. Baba decided about a month before the intense weekend - during the annual Labor Day weekend Kankouran¹⁶ dance conference performance - that he wanted Kora music for *Paths*. It was a predetermined part of the process and product but added, chronologically, after the movement was set. Cissoko, the kora player who belongs to a family of storytellers from West Africa, follows the set tempo but has freedom to collaborate - accent and interact - with the movement and poetry reading. He chooses to respond to the movement and poetry, and not necessarily the theme or concept of the dance.

I believe one of Baba's favorite things to do as a choreographer is collaborate with another art work – not another artist – but art form (and I don't mean to infer that he does not collaborate well with others, but he's usually "steers the ship" if he is being creative with another person.

*Costume / Attire*¹⁷. The idea for the top that Kemal and I will wear is inspired by traditional Ghanaian smock.¹⁸ The idea for the pants is inspired by traditional Senegambian *Dabas*.¹⁹ Sewn on the top and pants will be some appliqué – to loosely symbolize *Paths* in design. The colors of the attire will also reflect the Yin and Yang. Kemal's attire will be all white with black accents while, Stafford's attire will be all black with white accents.

V. Men Dance Like This: *Paths*, Baba Chuck, and Selected Review of Literature

The Black male body has been a recurring discourse on the American concert stage. Ronald Jackson coined the terms, *scripts*, to articulate the stereotypes that concertgoers, namely white audiences, project onto our bodies. His research reveals that the Black male body has been historically inscribed as sexual, violent and exotic.²⁰ Susan Manning in her examination of danced spirituals found that the Black male body was seen as a site of aesthetic failure at the turn of the twentieth century. According to Ramsey Burt's theory about masculinity as a Western universal, our masculinity is "marked" because it differs from that of white male rule.²¹ Yet, Stafford and I still dare to grace the concert stage with our big, Black male bodies exuding and simultaneously investigating our agency and a deep-seated need to express our cultural identities. Fully aware of the theoretical discourse that surrounds our performance presence, we, as researchers, focus our attention on the scripts with which Baba Chuck Davis, our dance father, has imbued our dancing

¹⁶ KanKouran West African Dance Company has existed in Washington DC for over twenty years.

¹⁷ It is important to note that Baba Chuck typically calls the costume for African dance, "Attire".

¹⁸ The smock is the most distinctive dress for Northern Ghanaian men. It is the traditional dress and is found in Northern Ghana. The material is hand-woven in strips and sewn together. Often symbolic patterns and designs are overstitched on the front and back.

¹⁹ The traditional men's pant.

²⁰ Ronald L. Jackson II, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 75.

²¹ Ramsay Burt, "The Performance of Unmarked Masculinity" in *When Men Dance Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders* ed. Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay et. al. (New York, Oxford University Press, 2009), 154.

bodies in *Paths*. In our African dancing world, a solace from the strictures of conventional masculinity prescribed by both our American and African American communities, how would Baba have audiences receive our performance?

Baba's response to this inquiry resides in his description of Stafford's and my gendered performance. For him, a visceral heteronormativity resides in the integrity of *Paths*. Our performed masculinity, as it is constructed in American contexts, further perpetuates the narrative. Davis responds:

If you were some other dancers, it would be a problem. There is no problem with you, as an artist, and Stafford, as an artist, when it comes to masculinity on stage. We have to be realists. In what we're doing, there is a masculine side and a feminine side. When I want the feminine side, I will ask for women or very effeminate men. This work is for men—for two men—not for two sissies—not for two homosexuals. I mean flamboyant. (You know what the word is.)

The dance is for two masculine men. [Emphasis added.]²²

Baba's comment, "We have to be realists," suggests an assumed responsibility to conform to a Western way of being gendered. While one might conclude from a superficial read of his interview text that Baba is drawing on a problematic assumption that sexuality has a necessary role in performance and that one's non-heterosexuality prohibits him from performing like a man, we encourage you to think differently. While we, too, find some theoretical problems with his supposition, we understand that Baba is speaking specifically about the artistic valor of *Paths*. He explains later in the interview that he has both masculine and feminine sides to his personality. *Paths*, he asserts, emanates from his masculine consciousness. Performance, he asserts, is about gender, not sexual preference.

Yet, Davis justifies his heteronormative conformity by Stafford's and mine physical history, arguing that our bodies represent his former somatic reality. Using a food metaphor, he remarks, "Remember. I didn't always have all this macaroni cheese! There were several times when I was just a lean string bean and boiled potatoes with no butter."²³ He continues:

All that comes into play. The fact that both of you are tall... You see? I can relate. The fact that both of you have big butts... I can relate.

²² Chuck Davis, interviewed by Stafford Berry, Jr. and C. Kemal Nance, tape recording, 16 October, 2011, Durham Arts Council, Durham, NC.

²³ Chuck Davis, interviewed by Stafford Berry, Jr. and C. Kemal Nance, tape recording, 16 October, 2011, Durham Arts Council, Durham, NC.

There is, by happenstance, a biological connection that is psychological. You see? Fortunately, neither you nor Stafford is ugly. Thank God! So, I can say that you are my sons.²⁴



Figure 1: Photography by Steve Clarke. (L to R) Stafford C. Berry, Jr. and C. Kemal Nance.

While Baba would have us dance in a way that somehow reflects the heteronormative society out of which we are born (realism), Stafford and I profoundly dance our authentic selves, replete with our physical athletic potential but with no conscious or reverent regard with what society expects of us. With laughter, tom-foolery, and female imitation, we took improvisation jabs at heteronormativity. If our rehearsal process informed how Stafford's and my dancing bodies' projection of our gender, then our achievement in appearing like 'average Joes' is ironic at best. Yet, it is our heteronormative portrayal, a gender performance that is authentic for us, that is significant for

Paths and important for our embodied representation of African dance traditions.

Baba, both in the formal interview and personal conversations, has offered what he thought were important lessons for us as male artists, as keepers of African dance traditions. The following is an excerpt from one of these conversations about the lessons he thought African American men should learn from their involvement in dance.

Some of what hinders us when we are on our path?

In the ancient days we had rites of passage under the guidance of the elders. They taught us to walk with our faces lifted and our eyes on the horizon. If our eyes are on the horizon, you are able to use your peripheral vision to see. When you are walking in that parallel position you are walking, one step... one step... one step... like this. If there is an object on that path that will cause you difficulty, you see it before you get to it. If you walk in turn out with one foot going this way and one foot going that way—you begin to look down because the body is forced to look down. As you continue with one foot going this way and this foot going that way eventually, your testicles will split.

And naturally that is... (What's the word?) a metaphor.²⁵

In his advice to us, he draws a metaphor for feet positioning. African dance is largely performed in parallel. While Western vocabularies are accessed through a 'turned out' position, Baba's 'moral to the story', as it were, is that Black men should dance in proper alignment. This is both a cultural and physiological project. A focused attention on the Western canon or a distraction from what we are supposed to do results in castration, a proverbial emasculation. A drastic and

²⁴ Chuck Davis, interviewed by Stafford Berry, Jr. and C. Kemal Nance, tape recording, 16 October, 2011, Durham Arts Council, Durham, NC.

²⁵ Chuck Davis, interviewed by Stafford Berry, Jr. and C. Kemal Nance, tape recording, 16 October, 2011, Durham Arts Council, Durham, NC.

painful conceptualization, this metaphor is one that speaks loudly to us as African American men. The reference to a ‘horizon’ and the integration of the wisdom of the elders have all the components for an Afrocentric paradigm, one that places African phenomenon in the center of analysis of African people.²⁶ Moreover, Davis’s parallel vs. turn out model also provides us with a useful schema for examining masculinities.

Current trends in masculine studies literature reveal that masculinity is a rhetorical device that codes male behavior for a given society.²⁷ While they are historically situated and informed, masculinities are created all the time; they instruct us on how we are ‘supposed’ to embody our gender role. According to the masculinities that exist in our country, Baba, Stafford, and I, with our tall, muscular physiques and our bodies’ heteronormative materiality should be something other than dancers.

Turn out. African American masculinities have been largely situated in a problematic comparison with white male rule. Largely, African American masculinity is the stylistic acceptance of being denied rights and privilege of White patriarchy; thereby essentializing Western “whiteness” is an archetype to which we aspire.^{28 29 30} As I run the risk of exhausting Baba’s metaphor, this unattainable white masculinity is the gravity that forces our hips to turn out and our feet to point away from us. African American masculinity sits in Baba’s metaphor as the Black masculinity that pioneering theorist, Robert Staples argues, emerges from the emasculation of African people during the enslavement period.³¹

Walk in parallel. Baba admonished us, as African American dancing men, to use Western dance nomenclature as tools to project our identities. When we asked him to articulate his message to all African American dancing men, not just those of us who study African dance, he said the following:

Is there a lesson in the world of dance for Black men? YES! The lesson is to learn your discipline. **Learn who you are.** Be prepared to understand that other worlds might be there for you to use but not necessarily for you to keep. Dance affords you the opportunity to do whatever you desire. Once you have become disciplined, you choose your course. [Emphasis added.]³²

²⁶ Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity The Theory of Social Change*, (Chicago: African American Images, 2003), 2.

²⁷ Michael Gard, *Men Who Dance Aesthetics, Athletics & the Art of Masculinity*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 2.

²⁸ Athena D. Matua, “Theorizing Progressive Black Masculinities” in *Progressive Black Masculinities* edited by Athena D. Matua et. al. (New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006), 20-21.

²⁹ Richard Majors, “Cool Pose” in *Men's Lives* edited by M. S. Kimmel & M. A. Messner, (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1989), 83-84.

³⁰ Marlene Connors, *What is Cool? Understanding Black Manhood in America*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1995)

³¹ Robert Staples, *Black Masculinity: The Black Male Role in American Society*, (California: The Black Scholar Press, 1982), 2.

³² Chuck Davis, interviewed by Stafford Berry, Jr. and C. Kemal Nance, tape recording, 16 October, 2011, Durham Arts Council, Durham, NC.

Baba uses dance vocabularies to describe a gender role for us as African American men. ‘Walking in parallel’ of encourages us to look to an African ideology to construct our identities, one that precedes our experience in the United States, one that the ‘elders’ would sanction. Throughout the interview, and the creative process, Baba refers to the ways of the elders, prioritizing an ancient Africa as a preferred code of ethics. For Baba, the elders have the code for which we should pattern our lives, much like he serves as an elder in Stafford’s and my life. With dance of ancient Africa, Baba has directed Stafford and me on a trajectory toward our African center.

VI. A Constant Digging: Rooting through Many Paths of African Dance (Stafford’s Interview of Baba)

After devoting my life to a career that employs African Dance and culture as a reservoir of inspiration, investigation, and exploration, I was excited by the opportunity to probe Baba Chuck further about the codification of African dance in America. Interest in this subject has, largely, been impacted by my personal interest in the evolution of African Dance as technical form and philosophy, and also by the need to address what many ‘naysayers’ in the African Dance community in America deem as the ‘watering down’ of African dance.

I shaped this investigation, the questions themselves and the direction of the responses as an improvisational inquiry.

It’s Diluted! Baba Chuck assumes an essentialist perspective with regards to presenting African Dance in America. First, the geographic location of the dance must be indicated rather than simply calling it “African Dance” and, Second, it can only be labeled “authentic” African dance as opposed to ethnic African dance, which -by definition- must take place at it’s given place of birth in Africa.

Stafford: Kemal asked you a question that sort of went like this... “Can we create new African Dance? “ You said, “No.” Can you explain why [you said ‘no’]?”

Baba Chuck: No. The reason I said “no” is because we know that ethnic dance comes from the community and the setting where it is born and we’re here [in America]. We can be inspired by what we learn and create dances, rhythms, movements based on those traditions but it would be an inspiration. We here are doing African styled dance and that’s why I am very quickly getting away from saying that we’re doing African dance because when you say you are doing African dance... that’s continental. That means that you are doing dance that is indigenous to the continent, and there is no one dance or style or rhythm that is indigenous to the whole continent.

...

You must be able to place it, and by doing this, Stafford, we will get more and more into recognizing the fact that dance coming from the continent of Africa has a place in this universe and it's not just something "ooga booga" thrown in.³³

Birth of the Dance of African Americans. At the risk of seeming unsupportive of my mentor, I draw focus to a point of irony. Baba has commented in past conversations that he has been criticized or "burned in effigy" by denigrators of his work in African Dance throughout his career. Many among a much younger generation of the African Dance community in America have commented that his work is not 'real African Dance'. This constant need for codification of our dances as a foundation of what we deem 'real' or 'pure' suggests our constant struggle with issues of identity. Baba, often professes that the reason he pursued dances of Africa was to combat the 'Tarzan'³⁴ ideology or "Ooga booga" which before the Civil Rights Movement basically depicted colored (black) people as savage.

Stafford: Alright. Can I ask you, Baba, to also give your opinion on this: If we think about the middle passage - the time during which Africans were brought to this country and to other parts of the (African) Diaspora. And thinking about Africans in this country, when the drum was taken from them and so many of their cultural items were taken from them and they "survived" the best way they could by – I don't want to use the word because it doesn't quite say what I want it to say but – almost merging their cultures in order to communicate with one another and still keep their traditions as alive as possible, what would you call the dance that was birthed out of this-?

Baba Chuck: Genetic Memory.

Stafford: What would be the name of the dance? Would you name it "genetic memory"?

Baba Chuck: On these shores...? That would be "African American," because it's born on these shores and, as I said, coming from genetic memory. And as you look back and check into the history, how many of slave narratives have you read wherein they were able to name the dance and the language, sing the song fully? There is that attempt at destroying the cultural and destroying the memory.³⁵

...

³³ Chuck Davis, interviewed by Stafford C. Berry, Jr. tape recording, 16 October, 2011, Durham Arts Council, Durham, NC.

³⁴ As of January 15, 2012 Wikipedia lists on its Website: Tarzan is a fictional character, an archetypal feral child raised in the African jungles by the Mangani "great apes"; he later experiences civilization only to largely reject it and return to the wild as a heroic adventurer.

³⁵ Chuck Davis, interviewed by Stafford C. Berry, Jr. tape recording, 16 October, 2011, Durham Arts Council, Durham, NC.

Applying the Hypothesis: Back to Africa, forward to Brazil. My 14-year tenure as a touring artist with the African American Dance Ensemble (AADE) was punctuated with statements from Baba regarding my inquisitive nature. Typically at the tail end of many administrative conversations he would remark, “You know Stafford is going to have a question about it...” He was correct. I often wanted to know, “How?” or “Why?” This line of questioning for *Baba to Sons* proved to be no different.

Stafford: Ok, thank you Baba. So... another question... I’m taking for granted that – going back to the original statement about not being able to create new African dance – that that to me is talking about the (African) Diaspora. Is it also talking about on the (African) continent or no?

Baba Chuck: If you are there and you are there in –where did I just come from – Medina (Senegal, West Africa), in Ghana, and the musicians have all of these traditional instruments and they are coming up with a new rhythm and then the dancers come forth and they put new dances – not Atsiagbekor³⁶, not Bamaya³⁷, but they come up with something new to that new rhythm, that’s African dance because it’s born there. You see. But if we do that – and that’s because they all speak the same language; they all have the traditional drum; every song, every word is understood by everybody there, so that’s African; that’s pure; that’s ethnic. But the minute it leaves there then it becomes theatre... and it’s African there but once it gets here – if you tried to do that same thing here, it would be African-American because it’s born here, not in Africa. But the inspiration and the authenticity – that’s the word that I had not used – will keep it African-American, will keep that bit of African inside, but it’s not totally.

Stafford: I am struck by this whole idea of Place determining the dance.

Baba Chuck: It’s not saying that it isn’t new but it just isn’t African. Here it’s African American. In Brazil, it’s African Brazilian because all those elements are still coming from the Motherland, but it is not totally. It’s not pure ethnic.

Stafford: And it’s not pure ethnic (African Dance) because....

Baba Chuck: It’s not born on the land.

³⁶ Atsiagbekor is among the oldest traditional dances of the Ewe-speaking people of Southern Ghana, Togo, and Benin. Originally a war dance performed after battle when the warriors returned to the village, it is now performed on many social occasions.

³⁷ Bamaya, a Dogbane harvest dance usually performed by men in ladies’ skirts, involves wiggling of the pelvis. This special dance is based on the story of a man who maltreated his wife, resulting in a plague of famine for the whole territory. It was revealed that in order to humble the man in question to his wife, all the men in the village had to dress like women.

Stafford: Ok.³⁸

...

Authentic vs. Ethnic the Idea of Expanding. My personal perspective of African dance is that it occurs wherever the culture resides, which does not necessarily bind it to the land. Admittedly, this provides a very “general” (and do I dare say generic) idea of what constitutes African dance. In this way, it expands the range of African dances from the traditional – such as the Mhande ritual dance from the Karenga people of Zimbabwe – to the contemporary, Christian rooted – such as the Clown and Krump dances of Southern California. There is something to be gained by this expansion as well as Baba’s insistence on specificity of place.

Stafford: Then what would you say to this statement, “African dance occurs wherever African people are.”

Baba Chuck: If it is away from their land, then it can be authentic. They can do authentic dances.

Stafford: but it’s not... ethnic

Baba Chuck: [simultaneously] ethnic.

Stafford: Ok

Baba Chuck: So wherever they are it can still be authentic, but it’s not ethnic.

Stafford: Ok. Question... What would be the importance of delineating authentic from ethnic in a situation where somebody sees African dance in this country.

Baba Chuck: Then you get into identification. You have to identify the source. If you’re doing it here – the source of your inspiration, talking about the traditions, understanding that what you are doing is based on pure ethnic forms that are coming from a particular ethnic group in a particular part of the continent. But you have taken that and you’ve employed your theatre knowledge... and yes the whole thing is authentic right down to shaving the hairs on your pubic area to make sure that it has a particular design if that is in the culture, but that still does not make it ethnic because it was not born there. It is ethnic to you here so this is an African-American work, you see.³⁹

...

Stafford: Ok, that’s it for now.

³⁸ Chuck Davis, interviewed by Stafford C. Berry, Jr. tape recording, 16 October, 2011, Durham Arts Council, Durham, NC.

³⁹ Chuck Davis, interviewed by Stafford C. Berry, Jr. tape recording, 16 October, 2011, Durham Arts Council, Durham, NC.

Baba Chuck: I feel like I'm writing a book.

Stafford: You are helping (us) write a book. You are!⁴⁰

VII. Conclusion

To be the receivers of Baba Chuck's legacy is unfathomable. He stands as the most recognized and accomplished American-born African dance choreographer and teacher since traditional African dances have graced the American concert stage. He has acquired a deep-rooted wisdom without compromising his identity, his ethics, and his mission. He is the example for us to follow.

"Baba to Sons" as a research process afforded Kemal and me the opportunity to analyze our experience with Davis in lieu of three research interests and their intersectionality: the creative process, African dance continuity for the American concert stage, and the danced transmission of African-American masculinities. Chronicling the act of making dance with Baba Chuck Davis, unpacking our collective discourse as African American dancing men who employ African dance vocabularies for our creative and scholarly work, and using our subjectivity as a potential paradigm for the continuation of African traditions in an African American dance culture, we land in an important space that underscores the intersection of gendered scripting, cultural permanence, and the creative process. This space of multi-dimensional understanding requires of us the critical and – simultaneously - delicate handling of a legacy from our elder(s) that will perpetuate the existence and propagation of men in the African dance arena in an American context.

Kemal and I hold membership in the American Academy, we are often required to talk about African dances in ways that are not necessarily congruent with how we experience and perpetuate them. Let us consider this essay as a critical process, for example. It is helpful in providing ways to think about African dance as a discourse, but it does not account for the meaningful yet semiotic information of our lived perspective. Concurrently, many African American dancers have adopted ways to think about African dance in comparative ways – *real vs. fake, pure vs. 'ooga booga', authentic vs. non authentic* - that are not necessarily compatible with how we engage the dance – *as affirmation, as sacred, as life-affirming, as community-building, as healing...* African Americans are in a continual struggle for identity, where authenticity is an indicator of value (the closer it is to the original, the more pure it is) when, in fact, authenticity in this case really means devoid of any idea that seemingly decentralizes "blackness" and/or that which is perceived as representing our heritage. 'Conversation' about African dance is helpful because it offers a modality for analysis, but it fails to fully and deeply 'get at' the work holistically. With this in mind, we attempt to draw conclusions from our embodied experience working with Baba Chuck Davis and our own experience and process.

⁴⁰ Chuck Davis, interviewed by Stafford C. Berry, Jr. tape recording, 16 October, 2011, Durham Arts Council, Durham, NC.

Baba Chuck argues that the phrase, ‘African dance’ as a term that references a specific cultural item is problematic because it fails to acknowledge place inside the continent (of Africa) nor does it contextualize the dance by using specific identifiers of place such as location, ethnic group, rhythm, and language.

Kemal adamantly disagrees, arguing that the term, African, is an African American construction. ‘Africa’ links us to an important past and has to encompass it all. While it is helpful to know the contexts, not knowing it does not negate the meaning of African Dance from being porous and multiplicitous. Molefi Asante purports that Africa is about place, time, and perspective.⁴¹ Kemal adds that for Baba Chuck, it is very much about place and time. While we all value the ways of our ancestors, we find this problematic because this stymies the living, breathing ‘Africa’ we dance everyday. It is important for us to respect the possibility of an evolving African future. The term, ‘African dance’ necessarily describes the people who do it and a cultural context which can include folk life and choreography.

While Kemal disagrees with Baba Chuck’s sentiment about the term African Dance, I assert that the two ideas regarding terminology of African dance—incomplete and inherent contextualization—are not oppositional. They are two different ways at the material that may overlap during engagement in the body; one is a philosophical or people-centered embodiment and the other is a practical or place-centered embodiment.

People-Centered Perspective:

The phrase “African Dance” as a term that references a specific cultural item is valid because it recognizes a people across time as its initial contextualization [people-centered]. If we assert that one’s identity is attached to the body no matter where it resides, then it seems reasonable to determine that, regardless of context or struggle for identity, the dance that comes from the body -- no matter the context-- is no less valued or pure, so to say that dances done by African Americans cannot be called (ethnic) African dance --as Baba suggests-- because they don’t reference a specific place on the continent, is to deny the fluidity of Africa – it’s people, geography, culture, and philosophy.

Place-Centered Perspective:

When one looks to the continent of Africa and, in particular, at its dances, it becomes quite clear that “there is no one dance or style or rhythm that is indigenous to the whole continent.” It is extremely important to attach contextual details like place and language because it helps preserve culture and it balances the risk of homogeneity in “multiculturalism.”

In an attempt to reconcile these ideas regarding fulfillment I propose that we see the term “African dance” as a broad array of dances that are rooted in ethnic cultures from the continent of Africa.

⁴¹ Molefi Kete Asante, *Afrocentricity The Theory of Social Change*, (Chicago: African American Images, 2003), 44.

This array of dances consists of indigenous and non-indigenous ethnic dances that are contextualized by place (geographic and environmental), time, and cultural perspective. African dance should be viewed as a tree wherein the culture represents the root of the tree and the various array of African dances are branches of the main root. Thus *Atsiagbekor*, an ethnic dance from the Ewe-speaking people of Southern Ghana, Togo, and Benin is situated next to *Hip-Hop*, an ethnic dance from the African American and Latina American people of New York City, America, and *Do Down Down Ba*, a “dance of the strong man” originating from the Manding ethnic group in Guinea, West Africa.

It is very revealing to hear in a process where Baba Chuck is calling for the “dance of the strong man” to also hear “Know that I love you,” when asked what is the one thing he wants Kemal and I to know. Included in his verbal “take-aways” from this question were two edicts, “Discipline” and “Know who you are so that you can do what you want.” Baba’s insistence on the contextualization of place in African Dance resonates at this moment and during his choreographic process.

The place where our identities—as African American males whose bodies are called upon to continue a long tradition of dances from Africa—are examined is during the engaging of the dance. As aforementioned, Baba’s choreographic scaffolding and counting system provides a way for us to access our place, meaning our movement, time, location, and value. When he instructs us to “pick up from [measure] 37” he is testing our knowledge of self, because each time we struggle to align our bodies to that particular measure, we are forced to question who we are by how well we understand that place. Doing so successfully strengthens our discipline and verifies that we do know who we are because we know: what physical movement we are doing, when we are doing it in context of the whole, where we are physically located in space, and what our embodied spiritual, physical and/or emotional value are at that time. Being able to hold this information firmly and to share it with other men in African dance through modeling and by nurturing is the legacy that is being passed from “Baba to Sons.” Ase’

Works Cited

- Asante, Molefi Kete. *Afrocentricity The Theory of Social Change*. Chicago: African American Images, 2003.
- Burt, Ramsay. "The Performance of Unmarked Masculinity" in *When Men Dance Choreographing Masculinities Across Borders* edited by Jennifer Fisher and Anthony Shay. New York, Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Conners, Marlene. *What is Cool? Understanding Black Manhood in America*. New York: Crown Publishers, 1995.
- Ellis, Carolyn. *The Ethnographic I A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, Altimira Press, 2004.
- Gard, Michael. *Men Who Dance Aesthetics, Athletics & the Art of Masculinity*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008.
- Jackson II, Ronald L. *Scripting the Black Masculine Body Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.
- Majors, Richard. "Cool Pose" in *Men's Lives* edited by M. S. Kimmel & M. A. Messner. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1989.
- Matua, Athena D. "Theorizing Progressive Black Masculinities" in *Progressive Black Masculinities* edited by Athena D. Matua. New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2006.
- Richards, Laurel "Writing: A Method of Inquiry," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research* edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publication Inc., 2000.
- Staples, Robert. *Black Masculinity: The Black Male Role in American Society*. California: The Black Scholar Press, 1982.
- van Manen, Maxx. *Researching Lived Experience*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).