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When Words Aren't Enough: Exploring Liturgical Dance as a Pastoral Care Practice for Black
Christian Women

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An abstract of
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Abstract

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By Deirdre Jonese Austin

In my experience as a scholar and a liturgical dancer, I have often reflected on liturgical dance as a practice that has coping and healing possibilities; it has helped me cope with and heal from stress and trauma in many instances throughout my lifetime thus far, from the unexpected loss of a loved one to the implications of political strife and violence in the United States. As such, my own story, and the stories of those I've danced with around coping and healing have led me to explore the following question: How can Black Christian women utilize liturgical dance, a combination of the artistic and the spiritual, in a way that facilitates healing from personal, racial, and pandemic-related stress and trauma? In this project, I turn to five Black Christian women who lead liturgical dance ministries and/or teach liturgical dance to think energetically about liturgical dance as a pastoral care practice. Through interviews with three of them and survey responses from two of them, I discuss Black Christian women's experiences of stress and trauma and the coping and healing possibilities of dance, with particular attention to the movement of the body, one's faith and spirituality, and the role of community. I conclude with a vision of what incorporating liturgical dance as a pastoral care practice might look like for the Black Church.

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Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Chapter 1: Exploring Liturgical Dance..... | 2 |
| Introduction..... | 2 |
| Literature Review..... | 3 |
| The Black Church Context..... | 4 |
| Stress, Trauma, and Healing in and for Black Christian Women..... | 5 |
| Somatics & Embodied Psychology: Addressing Trauma Through Movement..... | 15 |
| The Spiritual Dimensions of Dance in the Black Christian Context..... | 17 |
| Examining Liturgical Dance in the Black Church as a Healing Practice..... | 19 |
| Chapter 2: Examining Liturgical Dance Through the Eyes of Its Participants..... | 20 |
| Research Methodology..... | 20 |
| Anticipated Outcomes..... | 21 |
| Limitations of the Research..... | 22 |
| About the Participants..... | 23 |
| Experiences of Liturgical Dance..... | 24 |
| Exploring Stress and Trauma in The Lives of the Participants..... | 25 |
| Addressing Liturgical Dance Amid the Pandemic..... | 31 |
| Body, Spirit, and Community in Liturgical Dance..... | 34 |
| Reflections on Liturgical Dance as a Coping & Healing Practice..... | 41 |
| Chapter 3: Utilizing Liturgical Dance as a Pastoral Care Coping & Healing Practice in the Black Church..... | 43 |
| Developing a Pastoral Care Liturgical Dance Practice..... | 45 |
| Questions for Continued Exploration..... | 47 |
| Conclusion..... | 48 |
| Bibliography..... | 49 |

Chapter One: Exploring Liturgical Dance

Introduction

As someone who has participated in liturgical dance ministries, I am a witness to the healing role that liturgical dance has played in my life. I recall one rehearsal at church when I was in middle school that changed my life. I was a few minutes late to rehearsal, and I entered a dim room, as all the lights were turned off, with soft music playing the background. As I looked around, I noticed the other dancers were spread out all over the room. Some were seated and praying. Some were standing and moving their bodies to the music. Some gathered and prayed with each other. One anointed our hands and feet. This was a healing moment. There was no congregation watching us, and the focus was on us as individual dancers, as individual ministers. It is moments like these that have led me to ponder the role of dance in the lives of Black Christian women and ask the question: How can Black Christian women utilize liturgical dance, a combination of the artistic and the spiritual, in a way that facilitates healing from personal, racial, and pandemic-related stress and trauma?

For many Black Christian women in Black Church contexts of all ages, liturgical dance has taken on a degree of significance. While not all churches have dance ministries, all the churches I have been a member of have had dance ministries. I'll note that as I speak of dance ministries, I refer to dance groups within church institutions and Christian dance companies. The dance ministry is typically a part of the worship and arts ministry, alongside the choir and sometimes, the drama ministry. The primary purpose of the dance ministry is to prepare the church and congregation to experience the Holy Spirit; it is worship embodied. The dance ministry may prepare a choreographed piece to minister to the congregation, or they may engage in what is referred to as spontaneous worship in which they follow as the Spirit leads. Thus, there

is an artistic component concerning the movement of the bodies and sometimes, the use of props as well. There is also a spiritual element at play. The dancer is being used by God and is experiencing God through the act of dance. As such, liturgical dance is not perceived as a performance by as ministry. The act of participation in the dance ministry is communal, collective, and congregational, but there is also an individual and personal element.

In this research, I hope to explore liturgical dance as a communal and collective practice with an emphasis on how it impacts the individual participants. For the liturgical dancer, liturgical dance can provide a place to connect with God. It can also be a means of communicating to God what one may be struggling with through movement. Importantly to this research, dance can provide a means of coping and help facilitate healing because of both the physical and spiritual elements present in liturgical dance. As such, in this research, I suggest that liturgical dance can be utilized as a pastoral care practice that promotes healing from personal, racial, and pandemic-related stress and trauma for Black Christian women in a Black Church context because of its physical and spiritual properties. I do this through an interdisciplinary exploration of dance in relation to its possibilities in embodied psychology and somatics and dance as a Christian and African American spiritual practice.

Literature Review

Concerning the topic of liturgical dance, the literature is limited. Much of the literature around liturgical dance is of a devotional nature and focused on preparing practitioners of liturgical dance. The literature that focuses on liturgical dance as a scholarly subject is minimal. Nevertheless, there are a few books on the topic. One such book is *The Liturgy As Dance and the Liturgical Dancer* by Carolyn Deitering. The book provides a contextual understanding of liturgical dance, tracing its Biblical roots, exploring the ways in which it is practiced, and

exploring its purposes.¹ As such, the book is informative and important as it relates to liturgical dance studies. Nevertheless, this work focuses on the impact on dance broadly, and I hope to focus in on a specific community.

Another work that is significant to the study of liturgical dance is the anthology, *Dance as Religious Studies* that is edited by Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona. *Dance as Religious Studies* examines liturgical dance in relation to scripture, focuses on examples women throughout history who have been involved in liturgical dance, and discusses the “theory and practice of liturgical dance.”² Thus, the anthology is a collection of works that take liturgical dance as a scholarly subject. I intend to build upon this work while focusing specifically on dance as a coping and healing practice that can be connected to pastoral care.

Lastly, I will mention the book “*And We Shall Learn Through the Dance*”: *Liturgical Dance as Religious Education* by Kathleen Turner. This book also contributes to the literature that takes liturgical dance as subject; however, it does so in relation to religious education. In its discussion, it builds upon some of the other works discussed in their explorations of liturgical dance.

The Black Church Context

While there are many ways to define the Black Church, for the purpose of this project, I define the Black Church as the collective of churches that have predominantly Black membership. In doing so, I depart from the historical narrative developed around the Black Church with such works such as E. Franklin Frazier’s *The Negro Church in America* that focus on the development of Black Church institutions in a context in which they were not welcome in

¹ Carolyn Deitering, *The Liturgy as Dance and the Liturgical Dancer* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1984).

² Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, ed. *Dance as Religious Studies* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1993), 153.

historically White denominations and churches.³ While both C. Eric Lincoln in *The Black Church Since Frazier* and Anthony Pinn in *Understanding and Transforming the Black Church* challenge the traditional understanding of the Black Church in some ways, they do not go as far as I do in broadening the definition of the Black Church. Still, both Lincoln's discussion of the significance of the Black Church as a place of refuge from racism and Pinn's discussion of the Black Church as consisting of Black bodies provide space for my expanded definition.⁴ In this thesis, I define the Black Church in terms of majority Black membership as a means of recognizing the variety of contexts in which liturgical dance takes place. Liturgical dance occurs within the historically Black denominations and beyond the historically Black denominations, including its inclusion in majority Black nondenominational churches. In speaking of the Black Church, it is also important to state that my expanded definition also allows space for Black people from the diaspora who participate in majority Black Church spaces. Nevertheless, I still believe that there is a distinct culture present in Black Church spaces that traces back to the African roots of Christianity as practiced by Black people in the United States today. This culture is embodied in the Black people who practice Christianity in the United States, regardless of whether the church is situated within a historically Black denomination or within a denomination at all.

Stress, Trauma, and Healing in and for Black Christian Women

Defining Stress and Trauma

As my research focuses on healing from trauma, I begin with a discussion of trauma faced by Black women. Both *The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing, and Social Justice* and

³ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), 33-34.

⁴ Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 50; Anthony B. Pinn, *Understanding and Transforming the Black Church* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2010), 3.

My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies, discuss trauma in a way that is helpful for my research. In *The Politics of Trauma*, Staci Hines defines trauma as “an experience, series of experiences, and/or impacts from social conditions, that break or betray our inherent need for safety, belonging, and dignity. They are experiences that result in us having to vie between these inherent needs, often setting one against the other.”⁵ Additionally, in *My Grandmother's Hands*, Resmaa Menakem describes trauma as “the body’s protective response to an event—or a series of events—that it perceives as potentially dangerous.”⁶ Thus, trauma as I will discuss it is that which elicits a response or reaction that signals to the body that one is in danger or one’s sense of being is threatened. Trauma impacts one physically, emotionally, psychologically, and in other ways, and there are varying types of traumas, including historical, individual and personal, systemic, and collective. I will focus primarily on individual and personal trauma, systemic trauma regarding the intersections of racism and sexism, and collective trauma as it to the pandemic. In this paper I refer to both stress and trauma. Stress is that which may be difficult to deal with or described as traumatic to the individual but doesn’t impact the body or the psyche in the same way as trauma. What I refer to as stress may not be considered trauma according to psychological definitions; however, these impact the individuals in ways that are significant and can also be embodied.

A Discussion of Healing

It is also important for me to address how I will discuss healing within the context of this paper. First, I must acknowledge the ways in which discussions of healing in relation to religious cultures and communities have at times caused harm. Physical ailments, such as mental and

⁵ Staci K. Hines, *The Politics of Trauma: Somatics, Healing, and Social Justice* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2019), 74.

⁶ Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017), 7.

physical disabilities, are attributed to spiritual causes rather than physical and psychological causes. As such, prayer is sometimes offered as the primary solution and therapy and counseling are discouraged. Attributing physical ailments to spiritual causes can also lead to physical ailments being attributed to sin or a lack of faith on behalf of the individual and/or their family. I am not working within this potentially harmful framework in my discussion of healing.

My discussion of healing centers primarily around an ability to cope with life's trauma. In my research, I discuss liturgical dance as one of many tools that can help facilitate healing in Black Christian women. It is not to be a replacement for tools such as counseling and therapy that are offered by licensed and certified professionals. Healing in this context entails bringing the bodily systems back into alignment. Yet, it not only concerns the body but the spirit as well. The healing I speak of is holistic and impacts the entirety of one's being. While I do not wish to discount miraculous healing, the expectation in this work and research is not that one will be made fully healed and whole instantaneously, but that healing is an ongoing life process.

Stress and Trauma in the Lives of Black Women

As it concerns stress and trauma, Black women in the United States today experience varying amounts of stress and trauma in their lives because of their race, gender, social factors such as class, and life circumstances, such as the loss of loved ones. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and complicated this stress and trauma. While I will not give full attention to all factors that contribute to stress and trauma in Black women over the course of this paper, I will discuss racism as well as how racism and sexism intersect in contributing to stress and trauma that manifest physically in the bodies of Black women. I will also address the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black women as well as the role of the Black Church in contributing to stress and trauma for Black Christian women.

In addressing the racial stress and trauma Black women experience, one must begin with history, specifically historical trauma.⁷ Black people are born carrying the trauma that has been passed down through the generations; historical and generational trauma is embodied. In the United States, the discussion of historical and generational trauma often begins with the experience of slavery and continues through Jim Crow and to today. Thus, the trauma faced by Black women today is often complicated by that faced by their ancestors.

Today, there are many ways in which Black women experience racial stress and trauma. This includes covert, overt, intentional, unintentional, conscious, and unconscious manifestations of racism, and they also include what Menakem refers to as “everyday stressors, micro-aggressions, and a lack of regard.”⁸ These experiences can range from racial profiling while shopping to having a co-worker touch one’s hair. These experiences cause and contribute to stress and trauma in communicating that “*There is something wrong with African-Americans.*”⁹ Black women face white supremacy or what Menakem refers to as “white-body supremacy” and racism at varying levels throughout their lifetime, and this often becomes embodied and impacts one’s health and body in a myriad of ways that I’ll address later in this section.

While there are ways racism impacts Black people in the United States broadly, racism also interacts with sexism to impact Black women in ways that are unique to them. One way racism and sexism interact to contribute to stress and trauma is the pressure of Black women to live up to what Chanequa Walker-Barnes, a psychologist, professor, and preacher, refers to as the StrongBlackWoman trope. In *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength*, Walker-Barnes states that:

⁷ Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, 45.

⁸ Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, 75.

⁹ Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands*, 130.

Intertwining Black genius with true womanhood, the StrongBlackWoman developed as an identity with three defining attributes: caregiving, emotional strength/regulation, and independence. As Blacks, StrongBlackWomen were to be spiritually and emotionally strong, financially and emotionally independent, and committed to the uplift of Black families and communities. As women, they were to be consummate caregivers, morally upright, selflessly devoted to the needs of others, and capable of enduring struggle without complaint.¹⁰

Black women, including Black Christian women, often take on the StrongBlackWomen trope in ways that can strain and drain their bodies. They center others at the expense of caring for themselves because that is the way they have been socialized. Black women may push themselves to the limits to ensure that they meet the needs of all those they are responsible to as it relates to their families, their jobs, and their churches. Walker-Barnes also discusses the ways in which this is encouraged by the church that depends on the labor of Black women to maintain itself.¹¹ This is important to consider concerning the Black Christian women who are the focus of my research.

The need to be strong can also lead to Black women suppressing their stress and trauma. They don't speak of it for fear of being perceived as weak and because they don't want to worry others. They don't challenge it because many may not recognize that they are operating in the StrongBlackWoman trope. They understand it as simply the way things have always been. Regarding the StrongBlackWoman trope, it is also important to address the ways social factors, such as class, impact how Black women might experience the trope. For Black women who live

¹⁰ Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2014), 96-97.

¹¹ Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke*, 132.

in poverty, economic challenges combined with the StrongBlackWoman trope can diminish one's health, leaving one physically and emotionally in need and possibly, unable to ask for help.

Economic challenges and other impacts of the interplay of racism and sexism on Black women are detailed in The Institute for Women's Policy and Research's report entitled "The Status of Black Women in the United States." While the report also highlights some of the accomplishments of Black women, I'll focus primarily on some of the challenges as they contribute to stress and trauma for Black women. Concerning economic challenges, Black women have a lower median income than most other racial and gender demographic groups.¹² Roughly eighty percent of "Black mothers are breadwinners, who are either the sole earner or earn at least 40 percent of household income."¹³ Thus, regarding income, Black women must worry about caring for themselves and their families and stretching the little they have. Low income and a lack of income can lead to food insecurity. The report states that, "During 2014, more than one in four Black households experienced food insecurity at least once during the year (26.1 percent)..."¹⁴ Additionally, they not only struggle to meet the material needs of their families but the educational needs as well in that their low income and lack of income results in an inability to afford quality childcare for their children.¹⁵ The economic impact of racism and sexism can cause varying levels of stress and trauma in Black women, and the need and desire to work extensive hours and be productive in a capitalist system can have negative physical impacts on the bodies of Black women.

¹² Asha Du Monthier, Chandra Childers, and Jessica Milli, "The Status of Black Women in the United States," The Institute for Women's Policy Research, last modified June 7, 2017, 19, <https://iwpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/The-Status-of-Black-Women-6.26.17.pdf>.

¹³ Monthier, Childers, and Milli, "The Status of Black Women in the United States," 45.

¹⁴ Monthier, Childers, and Milli, "The Status of Black Women in the United States," 101.

¹⁵ Monthier, Childers, and Milli, "The Status of Black Women in the United States," 45.

Another source of trauma in Black women is physical and sexual violence. This can impact Black women physically, emotionally, and psychologically. Pertaining to physical violence, the Institute reports that “More than two-fifths of Black women experience physical violence by an intimate partner during their lifetimes, compared with 31.5 percent of all women.”¹⁶ Additionally, Black women have high rates of sexual violence and “are more likely to experience rape than women overall.”¹⁷ This report seems to only refer to that experienced in relationships and later in life. The report doesn’t appear to include the stress and trauma from childhood experiences of abuse. Thus, Black women can face a great deal of stress and trauma because of the ways in which racism and sexism interact.

Concerning the goal of this project, it is also important to address what I refer to as personal and individual stress and trauma, some of which are included in the previously highlighted examples. Personal and individual stress and trauma refers to instances and experiences that may impact one’s everyday life and routine. This can include the loss of a job or a partner’s loss of a job that can cause stress in the ways it impacts the family’s income. This can also include the loss of loved ones or a difficult moment with a child. These instances can make it difficult to go on with life as usual and can impact one’s sense of normalcy in a way that contributes to and complicates stress and trauma.

Moreover, the impact of the previously discussed stress and trauma on Black women is exacerbated by the pandemic. The pandemic has impacted Black women economically in that the drop in employment has been the highest for Black women.¹⁸ Thus, some Black women have

¹⁶ Monthier, Childers, and Milli, “The Status of Black Women in the United States,” 119.

¹⁷ Monthier, Childers, and Milli, “The Status of Black Women in the United States,” 120.

¹⁸ Tim Smart, “COVID-19 Job Market Wreaks Havoc on Black Women,” *US News*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/economy/articles/2021-04-15/black-women-suffering-the-most-from-covid-19-job-market-disruption>.

found themselves in even more dire economic circumstances. Additionally, there is a fear that their loved ones will contract COVID-19 and the need to cope with instances in which loved ones both contract COVID-19 and die from complications of COVID-19.¹⁹ Marginalized racial groups have high rates of hospitalization and death as it relates to COVID-19.²⁰ COVID-19 also contributed to stress and trauma in the ways it impacted the education system. With schools virtual, Black women had to find people to care for their children while they were at work. Additionally, some Black women were ill-equipped for the school adjustments in that they lacked a computer or enough computers or school support in working to meet and support their children's educational needs.²¹ Now that students have returned to in-person learning, their children may be behind and need additional educational support as a result, if they can afford it. Essence's *Impact of COVID-19 on Black Women* study sheds light on more: "Black women say the pandemic has most negatively impacted their emotional well-being (64%) and mental health (63%), with 43% saying it has also negatively impacted their physical health."²² Living in and having to cope with a pandemic has negatively impacted the health of Black women in a plethora of ways.

Hence, personal, racial, and pandemic stress and trauma can impact Black women physically, mentally, and emotionally. In listing some of the ways racism alone manifests in the body, Menakem includes the following: heightened anxiety and suspicion, ADD/ADHD, addiction, depression, hopelessness, self-hatred, high blood pressure, heart problems, and diabetes.²³ What I've listed here is not his exhaustive list. "The Status of Black Women in the United States"

¹⁹ "Essence Releases 'Impact Of COVID-19 on Black Women' Study," *Essence*, December 6, 2020, <https://www.essence.com/health-and-wellness/essence-covid-19-black-women-study/>.

²⁰ "The Color of Coronavirus: COVID-19 Deaths by Race and Ethnicity in the U.S.," APM Research Lab, March 5, 2021, <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>.

²¹ "Essence Releases 'Impact Of COVID-19 on Black Women' Study."

²² "Essence Releases 'Impact Of COVID-19 on Black Women' Study."

²³ Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands*, 129-130.

report also discusses health statistics that some might associate with embodied trauma and that are reflected in Menakem’s discussion. The report states that that “Over one in seven Black women have been told they have diabetes (15.4 percent).”²⁴ Furthermore, Black women have one of the highest rates of heart disease mortality.²⁵ This embodied stress and trauma also impacts maternal health. The report highlights the following concerning Black maternal health: “About 13 percent of babies born to Black women are classified as low birth-weight (less than 5 lbs. 8 oz.), compared with 7.0 percent of babies born to White women and 7.1 percent of babies born to Hispanic women.”²⁶ While the report does not include a discussion of mental health, it is also worth noting that the mental health needs of Black women, especially Black Christian women, can go unaddressed clinically because of the stigma within the Black community and the Christian community around mental health, including the StrongBlackWoman trope. Also, racism in the medical community contributes to mental health issues going unaddressed.²⁷

Thus, Black Christian women’s life experiences can contribute to stress and trauma that is held in one’s body and impacts one’s body. As such, the Black Church should provide methods and means that can help Black women cope and heal from this stress and trauma. In this paper, I offer liturgical dance as a method. In considering liturgical dance in relation to coping and healing, it is also important to address the studies that work to demonstrate the positive impact religion and religious communities can have on Black people.

Black Women, Mental/Psychological Health, and Religion

²⁴ Monthier, Childers, and Milli, “The Status of Black Women in the United States,” 89.

²⁵ Monthier, Childers, and Milli, “The Status of Black Women in the United States,” 89.

²⁶ Monthier, Childers, and Milli, “The Status of Black Women in the United States,” 89.

²⁷ Gloria Oladipo, “Black People Like Me Are Being Failed by the Mental Health System. Here’s How,” *Healthline*, July 2, 2019, <https://www.healthline.com/health/racism-mental-health-diagnoses#Holding-our-providers-accountable-looks-different-for-different-people>.

Two studies that highlight the impact of religion in African American people broadly and Black women specifically are “Balm in Gilead: Racism, Religious Involvement, and Psychological Distress Among African-American Adults” and “I’ve Got My Family and My Faith: Black Women and the Suicide Paradox.” “Balm in Gilead” focuses specifically on the role of religious involvement in helping African American people to cope with racism. In the study, they conclude that more frequent church attendance contributes to lower levels of distress around racial incidents, and they hypothesize that this could be connected to the messages taught in faith communities as well as participation in the church services themselves.²⁸ This suggests that there is something about the church culture or religious community that can be utilized to facilitate coping and healing.

Moreover, “I’ve Got My Family and My Faith” shows that Black women tend to have higher psychological health and lower rates of suicide as a result of their religious participation and social solidarity.²⁹ They share that an obligation and commitment to their families and communities as well as religious values and thoughts on suicide prevent them from taking their own life.³⁰ This is one instance in which the StrongBlackWoman trope seems beneficial. While this brings in the role of religious values, it also reiterates the importance of the community.

Thus, in working to analyze the potential role of liturgical dance in addressing trauma in Black Christian women, it is important to recognize the significant role religion plays pertaining to coping mechanisms and overall health. It is the religious community that offers support and gives one a reason to live, even amid the ways it can drain and contribute to stress and trauma.

²⁸ Christopher G. Ellison, Marc A. Musick, and Andrea K. Henderson, “Balm in Gilead: Racism, Religious Involvement, and Psychological Distress Among African-American Adults,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 2 (June 2008): 291–309, doi:10.1111/j.1468-5906.2008.00408.x.

²⁹ Kamesha Spates and Brittany C. Slatton, “I’ve Got My Family and My Faith: Black Women and the Suicide Paradox,” *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World* (January 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2378023117743908>.

³⁰ Spates and Slatton, “I’ve Got My Family and My Faith.”

The religious values and messages provide hope. Black Christian women can find comfort in a God who is with them in whatever they may be going through and find comfort in the faith and trust in a God who will pull them through. It is these messages and the sense of community that highlight the ways in which liturgical dance can facilitate coping and healing. As such, liturgical dance as an exercise of movement and as a spiritual practice offers a powerful tool for addressing trauma in Black Christian women.

Somatics & Embodied Psychology: Addressing Trauma Through Movement

While I have recognized the healing impact of religion and religious communities, in discussing dance, it is also important to recognize and understand the potential healing power of movement. As such, I turn to embodied psychology and somatics. In *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Bessel van der Kolk addresses the ways in which trauma is embodied and how healing from trauma requires the repair of one's relationship with one's body.³¹ Similar to the role of community in addressing healing through religion, one's community also plays a significant role in healing as it relates to addressing embodied trauma.³² Most relevant to the topic of liturgical dance is what van der Kolk refers to as "communal rhythms."³³ It is communal rhythms as demonstrated in "collective movement and music" that can help facilitate healing from embodied trauma.³⁴ Thus, embodied psychology provides insight concerning how liturgical dance can be employed as a practice of healing.

Somatics also contributes to my discussion of dance in ways that is like that of embodied psychology. To begin, Staci Hines in *The Politics of Trauma* defines somatics as:

³¹ Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 102.

³² van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 212.

³³ van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 336.

³⁴ van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 336.

a holistic methodology and theory of change that understands both personal and collective transformation through a radically different paradigm...Somatics understand both the individual and collective as a combination of biological, evolutionary, emotional, and psychological aspects, shaped by social and historical norms, and adaptive to a wide array of both resilient and oppressive forces.³⁵

Thus, somatics also recognizes the role of the community. Additionally, somatics focuses on the intersections of the body, mind, and spirit moving towards healing, an intersection that is important pertaining to my discussion of liturgical dance. Somatic awareness invites us to become aware of our bodies, somatic openness guides in deconstructing “embodied shapes and habits that no longer serve us,” and somatic practices entails coming to embody new modes of being. This occurs with an awareness of the social context shaping us and the way the land as well as what some would refer to as the spirit impacts us.³⁶ Somatics takes seriously the role of socialization and the need for both deconstruction and reconstruction in the healing practice. I hope that liturgical dance can be employed in the process of reconstruction regarding developing new practices of coping and healing.

Pertaining to relevant discussions of the body and movement, it is also important to address that which is most directly connected to this research: dance movement therapy. In *Dance Movement Therapy*, Bonnie Meekums discusses dance movement therapy as a form of psychotherapy and differentiates between it and what she refers to as therapeutic dance. What I am discussing in this paper falls within the therapeutic dance category.³⁷ Regarding movement, the discussion is similar to that offered by my examples of embodied psychology and somatics as

³⁵ Hines, *The Politics of Trauma*, 18-19.

³⁶ Hines, *The Politics of Trauma*, 25-34.

³⁷ Bonnie Meekums, *Dance Movement Therapy* (California: Sage Publications, 2002), 6-7.

it relates to the body and mind working together and movement as a means of reconstruction or ushering the individual into new modes of being.³⁸

In drawing on embodied psychology, somatics, and therapeutic dance, there are a few themes and ideas that are significant to my research on liturgical dance. I'll discuss dance as an act that unites the body, mind, soul, and spirit. Dance must consider one's entire being and work to bring all of one back into alignment. I also build upon van der Kolk's communal rhythms. Healing through dance is a collective and communal process as much as it is individual and personal. Additionally, while dance movement therapy recognizes that dance as a practice can have therapeutic qualities, in studying liturgical dance, I am not only examining the physical movement of the body but the role of spirituality and faith in promoting healing.

The Spiritual Dimensions of Dance in the Black Christian Context

Concerning liturgical dance in the Black Church, it is important to take two dance contexts into consideration: the Christian religious context and the African American context. As it relates to the religious context, dance is traced back to its Biblical foundations. Thus, dance is connected to one's relationship with God and begins and ends with one's faith and spirituality.³⁹ Both the intentions of the dance and the "spiritual value" of dance matters in the religious context.⁴⁰ Still, similar to embodied psychology and somatics, liturgical dance also pays attention to the unity of "body, mind, spirit and emotions," as Carolyn Deitering puts it in *The Liturgy as Dance and the Liturgical Dancer*, and unity of "body, mind, and spirit" as Carla De Sola puts it in "...And the Word Became Dance: A Theory and Practice of Liturgical Dance."⁴¹

³⁸ Meekums, *Dance Movement Therapy*, 8.

³⁹ Kathleen Turner, "*And We Shall Learn Through the Dance*": *Liturgical Dance as Religious Education* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2021), 123-124.

⁴⁰ Carla De Sola, "...And the Word Became Dance: A Theory and Practice of Liturgical Dance," in *Dance as Religious Studies*, ed. Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers), 59.

⁴¹ Carolyn Deitering, *The Liturgy as Dance and the Liturgical Dancer* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1984), 6, and Carla De Sola, "...And the Word Became Dance," 155.

One example that is significant in addressing the potential healing power of dance and bridging the Christian context of liturgical dance with African spiritual traditions is the use of dance in Macumba-Christianity. In “Movement as Mediator of Meaning: An Investigation of the Psychosocial and Spiritual Function of Dance in Religious Ritual” dance is discussed in relation to “preventative and primary care.”⁴² This section addresses directly what I am hoping to explore in this paper as it relates to: “the ways in which movement might serve to access an individual’s or group’s religious and/or spiritual approach, and to facilitate bringing body and soul into a working dialogue.”⁴³ It highlights the significance of spirituality and religion as well as the need to bring one’s entire being back into alignment.

In addition to the religious context, specifically the Christian context, it is important to consider African American dance and Black performance theory. *Steppin’ on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* addresses the significance of dance in the African American context in stating the following: “...on both continents black dance is a source of energy, joy, and inspiration; a spiritual antidote to oppression; and a way to lighten work, teach social values, and strengthen institutions. It also teaches the unity of mind and body and regenerates mental and physical power.”⁴⁴ Thus, dance in this context as well includes the alignment of one’s entire being. This quote also speaks to the potential coping and healing power of dance in relation to the African roots of Black dance in the United States. While not discussing dance in explicitly religious cultures and contexts, Brenda Dixon Gottschild offers that all Black dance has elements that lean into the body and soul in *The Black Dancing Body: A*

⁴² Valerie DeMarinis, “Movement as Mediator of Meaning: An Investigation of the Psychosocial and Spiritual Function of Dance in Sacred Liturgy,” in *Dance as Religious Studies*, ed. Doug Adams and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers), 205.

⁴³ DeMarinis, “Movement as Mediator of Meaning,” 207.

⁴⁴ Jacqui Malone, *Steppin’ on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 24.

Geography from Coon to Cool. For Gottschild, spirit and soul are expressed and at play in all forms of Black dance. She states: “I offer the following premises: First, spirit and soul are embodied, meaning that their location and means of expression for all human beings are in the flesh; secondly, through soul power, the body manifests spirit.”⁴⁵ In working towards healing in liturgical dance, there is a need to bring attention to the ways spirit and soul are embodied in this religious practice.

In both the Christian and African American context, the soul and spirit play a significant role as it relates to dance as an embodied practice of healing. There is an awareness of the ways in which that referred to as the spirit is at work within the dancer and within the bodily movements of the dancer. Additionally, both dance contexts, continue the theme and idea discussed in embodied psychology, somatics, and dance movement therapy concerning the unity of the body, mind, soul or emotions, and spirit. Thus, liturgical dance as an interdisciplinary practice has many elements that speak to its potential in helping people cope with stress and trauma and facilitating holistic healing from stress and trauma that works to bring one’s body, mind, soul, spirit and relationship with God, and relationship with others into alignment.

Examining Liturgical Dance in the Black Church as a Healing Practice

It is also important to situate this research within the Black Church religious culture context. I will discuss liturgical dance as a holistic pastoral care practice rooted in a womanist ethic of care and healing.⁴⁶ Thus, I am working towards healing for the individual Black Christian women, yet it is a healing that is best facilitated in community. Within my research, Black Christian women are incorporating their faith and relationship with God or their sense of

⁴⁵ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 222.

⁴⁶ Emilie M. Townes, *Breaking the Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998).

the spirit into the movement of their bodies as exercised through dance. Furthermore, in working to bring body, mind, soul, spirit, and relationships into alignment, one is moving not only toward healing through liturgical dance but wholeness and a love of self, both values of womanism significant in a womanist ethic of care and healing.

Additionally, while this research focuses on Black Christian women who participate in liturgical dance, I hope the conclusions from this research can be expanded and applied to others within the Black Church context. In completing this research, I am suggesting that liturgical dance can be offered alongside other modes and methods of pastoral care within the Black Church as it relates to promoting healing practices in community. Moreover, like embodied psychology and somatics, I believe that the themes and ideas present in my research on liturgical dance suggest that it can be applied to other contexts, even beyond the Church, as a practice that recognizes the healing power of the movement of the body and awareness of the spirit in the lives of people.

Chapter Two: Examining Liturgical Dance Through the Eyes of Its Participants

Research Methodology

I approach this research as a participant observer, as one who participates in liturgical dance in a Christian and African American or BLack context and is interested in analyzing its impact on those who participate in it. In this study, I primarily gathered information through surveys and interviews. I reached out to those in my community of liturgical dancers in Washington, DC, Charlotte, NC, and Atlanta, GA asking if they would be willing to participate in a survey or interview, allowing flexibility and with the goal of obtaining the same information in both formats.

Through the surveys and interviews, I gathered information concerning how the dancers perceive the healing power of liturgical dance in their lives and the lives of those they are in community with through dance. The questions begin taking a survey of their experiences of personal stress and trauma, racial stress and trauma, and pandemic-related stress and trauma. Next, they were asked to reflect on the role of liturgical dance in their lives, reflect on why they participate in liturgical dance and reflect on its possibilities for healing. The participants shared about instances in which dance helped them cope with or heal from an instance of stress and trauma as well as their witness of helping others do the same. Dancers also reflected on the role of liturgical dance amid the pandemic in their communities. The participants were asked to speak to both the significance of the physical movement as well as the role of their faith and spirituality in how they practice liturgical dance and its healing possibilities. Additionally, they were asked to share thoughts and reflections on the significance or importance of community to liturgical dance. These topics and questions reflect my intentions concerning my desire to explore how the physical and spiritual aspects of liturgical dance as well as the sense of community can help facilitate healing from personal, racial, and pandemic-related trauma in Black Christian women.

Anticipated Outcomes

I anticipated that liturgical dance would be a significant practice in the lives of those who participate in the research. For leaders especially, I expected that there would be a strong understanding as it relates to the possibilities of liturgical dance as a practice of healing, and I expected that most, if not all, participants would have at least one memory of an instance in which liturgical dance was used as a coping or healing practice amid a difficult life experience. I anticipated that for Black Christian women, the working of the spirit in liturgical dance would

play an important role as well as the dance family or community; the healing comes through one's faith in God and the love and support of one's community.

Limitations of the Research

There are limitations pertaining to the scope of this research. One limitation pertains to my limited sample size and participant selection. I reached out to five women I know personally who are involved in teaching liturgical dance and leading dance ministries. While I hope that what they've shared will give insight into the impact of liturgical dance for Black Christian women in a broad sense, my sample is too small to make any generalizations. Nevertheless, my limited sample size permitted me to focus more intently on the responses of those I interviewed and of those who completed the survey.

This research is somewhat broad in its focus on Black Christian women who do liturgical dance in Black churches. The role of and significance of liturgical dance may vary by denomination, geographic region, and even by church. Given my outreach begins with those in my own liturgical dance network, I anticipated that many participants would be members of Baptist and nondenominational congregations. Additionally, this research is not focused on the theology surrounding dance as much as it is the practice of dance itself. One's theology may also impact how one understands liturgical dance in relation to healing, and I suspected that glimpses of theology would be present in the responses received.

While my focus is on liturgical dance in the Black Church, I recognize that liturgical dance does not exclusively take place in Black churches. People of all races and ethnicities engage in liturgical dance, yet I would offer that liturgical dance is often shaped by its context and culture, which also includes church culture. Furthermore, one's church culture can also impact how one understands liturgical dance as well as worship more broadly in that some

church cultures may be more welcoming of dance as a mode of worship. As such, additional research on liturgical dance and healing might examine the ways in which perceptions and understandings of liturgical dance vary by context.

Lastly, while my research focuses primarily on liturgical dance as it relates to coping with and healing from trauma, it is important to remember that liturgical dance as a part of life also includes the incorporation of liturgical dance into positive life moments and celebrations. Liturgical dance can be employed as a healing practice, and it can also be employed to express joy. As such, future research might focus on the role of liturgical dance in other life experiences, such as a wedding or the birth of a child.

While current literature on liturgical dance is limited and dated, it is a practice worth exploring more, especially given its significance in the Black Church context. I intend to continue to research and explore the role of liturgical dance in the lives of the dancers and the ways it can be employed in society at large in my continued work and research.

About the Participants

As mentioned previously, this research focuses on the reflections of five Black Christian women who are involved in teaching liturgical dance, leading liturgical dance ministries within church contexts and/or have started their own Christian dance schools. For the purpose of this project, I refer to the participants as Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, Participant 4, and Participant 5. Three of the participants are in their twenties (Participants 1-3), and two of the participants are in their forties (Participants 4-5). The three older participants are married with at least one child. It is worth noting that the children of two are also involved in liturgical dance. Three of the participants are serving in nondenominational contexts, and two participants are serving in Baptist contexts. They all have a church home and serve in other areas in the church, such as with the children's and youth ministries. Additionally, all have some sort of formal dance

training or dance mentorship experience. All five participants have at least ten years of dance experience. Three of those who participated are involved in ministry occupationally, two are involved in education, and one is involved in customer service. I would anticipate that these facts speak to some of the experiences of teachers and leaders of liturgical dance ministries more broadly. They will likely have formal dance training, be active and involved in church, and work in occupations where the skills are similar or the same to that required of liturgical dance such as ministry, education, and customer service.

Experiences of Liturgical Dance

To contextualize liturgical dance in relation to my participants, I asked about their experiences in relation to dance broadly and leading dance ministries specifically. Participant 3 has served in a leadership role for about eight years; Participant 4 has been leading for over twenty years and leading her own ministry for about ten years; and Participant 5 has been leading dance for many years, has a degree in dance, and has been leading her own ministry for twelve years. All have experience teaching and leading varying age ranges from toddlers and children to senior adults. While the survey did not ask explicitly about leading dance ministries, Participant 1 has been involved in liturgical dance for 11-15 years, and Participant 2 has been involved in liturgical dance for 16-20 years. Thus, all have years of experience participating in and leading liturgical dance and can speak to its significance.

As it relates to liturgical dance, it is also important to consider the purpose or the why of liturgical dance. As it relates to the survey, both Participant 1 and Participant 2 selected the following as it relates to why they dance: “to connect with God,” “to minister to others,” “to stay physically fit,” and “to build community.” Participant 1 also selected “to express myself and/or my emotions.” Participant 3 shared, “So it is a form of communicating to God for me. It is a

sacred place. It is a secret place for me. It is a vulnerable place for me. All of that.”⁴⁷ Participant 5 shared:

“I dance because I feel called to this...Dance has always been a part of my life, but it is something the Lord has redeemed in my life. I never saw myself dancing in a church...I thought I'd be on Broadway somewhere. So now I do this out of just joy for the Lord and joy for myself. It brings me closer to the Lord. It's a way in which I communicate with God, through the dance and I communicate with others. And it goes back into what I said before that, liturgical dance allows me to have deep conversations with people that I really would sometimes have to jump a lot of barriers to share my testimony with. It allows me to share my testimony with multiple people at the same time.”⁴⁸

Hence, dance for both Participant 3 and Participant 5 is a means of communicating with God and works to provide a space for the dancer. Liturgical dance is both inward focused and outward focused. This is also highlighted in the responses of Participant 1 and Participant 2 as it relates to liturgical dance as a means of connecting with God and ministering to others. As such, while this project focuses on how liturgical dance impacts the individual, there is a collective benefit to utilizing liturgical dance as a coping and healing practice.

Exploring Stress and Trauma in The Lives of the Participants

Given the focus of this project is healing from stress and trauma, I began the survey and interviews with a discussion of experiences of stress and trauma for the Black Christian women participants. All had experienced personal stress or trauma, most had experienced racial stress or trauma, and all had been impacted by the pandemic in some way. In addition to dance, participants shared being in nature and prayer as coping mechanisms; however, I also asked

⁴⁷ Interview with Participant 3.

⁴⁸ Interview with Participant 5.

explicitly about dance given the context of this project. Participant 1 shared, “Dance helped me release all the stress I was feeling. I could be free! Dance was/is my outlet. It helped me connect with the Lord more intimately on a spiritual level. Dance helps me to control my emotions and speak what I am feeling rather than bottling it up.”⁴⁹ In the response of Participant 1, embodiment is significant to dance as it is a source of “release” of stress and emotions. Additionally, there is spiritual significance in one’s connection with God. These are themes that will reoccur in responses.

Participant 2 shared about the role of dance amid the loss of seven family and friends over the course of eight months in 2020 during the pandemic and the family challenges and tension as well as the depression related to that grief. As a result, Participant 2 spent time living with her grandparents. She shared:

I still remained in my dance classes and coordinated dance projects with my church's ministry, which became a way to cope and find God in the midst of my inner turmoil. Dance gave me something to anticipate and provided some sense of normalcy and joy, although my living situation had drastically changed. I was literally sleeping, eating, virtually teaching, and dancing in the quarter of my grandparents' house. I had never been used to this type of experience, but I am thankful for God being a sustainer and trusted Him to help me forgive my parents .”⁵⁰

Additionally, Participant 2 also shared about the role of dance amid medical treatments following the diagnosis of what had been a medical mystery since 2019. Participant 2 shared, “While there were days I didn't want to get up and dance, I prayed for God to give me unusual

⁴⁹ Survey from Participant 1.

⁵⁰ Survey from Participant 2.

strength so that I could continue to learn and grow in the gift He gave to me.”⁵¹ For Participant 2, the relationship to God is also significant in relation to liturgical dance. Faith plays a significant role as I’ll discuss later. It is God at work in and through the dancer that is important to consider as it relates to coping and healing from dance. Dance also offers something to look forward to.

Similar to Participant 2, Participant 3’s experience also related to coping and healing from grief. Participant 3 shared that her grandfather passed away in college, and she was not able to tell him goodbye before he passed away. It was a stressful time as she was away from home and in school at the time. She said, “And I end up dancing at the funeral, and so that my way of healing and kind of coping with the fact that I wasn’t able to have any final words with him.”⁵² For Participant 3, dance is a means of coping and healing from grief.

For Participant 4, liturgical dance is used to cope with and heal from the stress caused by transitions in life. She shared about the stress caused by a separation in a previously close relationship. It was prayer that helped her cope as well as faith as practice in liturgical dance as she shared in the following quote: “So it can bring stress, but coping is, like I said, the Lord utilizing the Holy Spirit to guide you to help you understand what happened, so you would not worship the person and or the thing that happened, but you would realize [you are] okay [with] God.”⁵³ Participant 4 also shared about the significance of liturgical dance in relation to her personal testimony. There is a specific song (I will not name the song for anonymity purposes) that she continues to minister to at each of her concerts that she said: “Takes me back to where I

⁵¹ Survey from Participant 2.

⁵² Interview with Participant 3.

⁵³ Interview with Participant 4

was in search for...Like I didn't know who I was, so I had an encounter with God."⁵⁴ She continues:

"I'm all over the place, and I'm young. I'm about to go to college. What do you want me to do [Lord]?...and I found myself reading His word more and, after listening to...it gave me the outlet to personalize everything that I was going through in my adolescence and transitioning from high school to college because I had to leave my family... You can't tell my story for me...like that's personal to me...and that's why that solo, that dance, I will always cherish it...Even if I'm ninety-nine, I think I would still do that solo or I would teach somebody it because that's how God saved me and how God found me and how God, you know, gave me this gift and showed me that, Hey, you can utilize this gift to give me glory and to get yourself together..."⁵⁵

Participant 4's story speaks again to the significance of faith in liturgical dance as well as dance as a means of expression. Through dance, Participant 4 shares an experience that it may be difficult to put into words, and through dance, Participant 4 shares her testimony. This is significant because in many Black churches, the sharing of testimonies is a common practice. As such, this experience invites us to think about how dance might impact liturgy and how we understand traditional church practices.

Participant 5 also shared the significance of her personal life and journey in shaping the song selection of her concerts: "I'll put it this way. Like, every year, God works out, concerts through my life, meaning all of my inspiration from movement, everything, comes from my real life with what the Lord is ministering to me."⁵⁶ Additionally, like Participant 2 and Participant 3,

⁵⁴ Interview with Participant 4.

⁵⁵ Interview with Participant 4.

⁵⁶ Interview with Participant 5.

dance plays a significant role as it relates to coping and healing in relation to grief and loss. Participant 5 shared, “When my grandmother passed, and that was probably the hardest time that I had to minister, but it ministered to me, and it ministered to my family...And also...I had an ectopic pregnancy: The loss of baby C. I remember during that time I told my friends like don’t send me any cards or anything. I just need music. I need music that can speak to me...And along with the music, being able to move to the music played a big role in my healing process.” While I do not spend much time on the music itself, this response as well as others speak to the significance of music as well as the movement of the body in begin able to heal us and help us release the stress and trauma that may be building up in our bodies.

Liturgical dance is not only significant for the individual participants, but all have witnessed the ways in which liturgical dance can be used as a communal practice for coping and healing. Participant 4 speaks to this specifically in saying:

“...I remember, we used to have women’s meetings and stuff like that. Like it would just be the adults dancing and coping, and I remember before we used to dance, we used to say, ‘Hey, I need prayer’ because I’ve had a miscarriage or my marriage is being attacked...before we even started dancing. It’s like it was necessary for us to unload if that makes sense, so that in itself us an outlet and...be like ‘You know what? I can freely dance this and cope better now that I have a sisterhood and people that understand.’...I’ve choreographed dances and songs to people in their pain and their trauma, because I can relate to what it was that they were asking prayer for.”⁵⁷

Hence, for Participant 4, coping and healing can be intentioned with the choreography.

Participant 4 also shared about a piece in an upcoming concert that focuses on community

⁵⁷ Interview with Participant 4.

workers and unity in God. She said, “I’m projecting it to be my favorite piece only because I know the different people That it would touch because they will see themselves on stage...”⁵⁸

While I’ve focused on the individuals thus far, considering liturgical dance as it relates to coping and healing is also important as it relates to what is reflected through dance. Those bearing witness to the dance are able to see themselves and their experiences through dance. Dance gives voice to their experience in a way they themselves may be unable to. Given the purpose of this thesis, I will share that this has been my own experience with dance. While I myself use liturgical dance for coping and healing, I can recall a time where another dancer was able to bear witness to my own experience as it relates to having one of my dance teachers minister through dance at my father’s funeral. Her movements expressed our grief and pain amid the loss as well as the joy found in knowing that as people of faith, we believe that he is in a better place.

In asking the question about liturgical dance in relation to coping and healing from stress and trauma early in the survey and interview, I was able to identify the aspects of liturgical dance that carry significance for the participants prior to asking explicitly about those which I desired to focus on. The responses of the participants speak to the spiritual significance of liturgical dance. It is dance alongside prayer or dance as prayer that can help Black Christian women cope and facilitate healing. There is a belief that God is moving through dance and that God is at work in both the dancer and spectator during the moment of liturgical dance. Additionally, dance is an outlet; it is a means of expression and release. It is through the physical movement of the body in dance that one is able to free themselves from stress, trauma, and all manner of things that may be bogging them down. Dance can offer joy amid moments of pain, and dance can express our pain and suffering. Also, for liturgical dance, the song one ministers

⁵⁸ Interview with Participant 4.

to itself is important. That may be a topic worthy of further research. Lastly, liturgical dance can be a significant coping and healing practice not only for those who practice it and participant in it, but they can serve as proxies in the coping and healing of others through dance. This can take place through choreography that works to express the pain and suffering of others. Community is important in dance, and liturgical dance is a communal practice.

Addressing Liturgical Dance Amid the Pandemic

Given my research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was important to consider the pandemic in relation to the coping and healing potential of liturgical dance. For many, the COVID-19 pandemic was a time of isolation. People could not gather in community in the same way. Many churches and religious institutions were closed physically, and leaders had to be innovating in continuing to meet the needs of those in their communities. Like ministry more broadly, the pandemic posed some challenges for liturgical dance ministries, but it also provided new opportunities to engage.

For Participant 1, liturgical dance provided joy amid depression, a means of reconnecting to God, and gave her “a sense of purpose through Christ to know I was loved and created for a reason. A reason that I now understand better than ever.”⁵⁹ Participant 3, like Participant 1, shared about the impact on her as an individual:

“So what I actually did at the start of the pandemic was I just went outside, and I just started dancing, and it was one of the most peaceful things ever. I would say that the opportunity and the privilege to be able to dance has strengthened since this pandemic because I do believe that there are moments where words do not do emotions justice and so especially being in a pandemic, I would say that I've been able to deepen that: One

⁵⁹ Survey from Participant 1.

gratefulness to be able to dance. Two, really...I would say expanding that place of freedom 'cause I feel like dance for me is a place of freedom where I zone everybody out...’’⁶⁰

For Participant 3, there is a freedom found in being able to release through dance and a gratefulness for dance itself. It is important to note that dance is more than a practice for those who participate in liturgical dance. It is a part of who they are, and it is a part of their calling. As Participant 3 highlights, it is a “privilege” to be able to dance, and it is not something that is taken lightly.

Participant 2, Participant 4, and Participant 5 spoke to the impact of the pandemic on the ministries they lead. Participant 2 shared how she was able to adopt and adjust with the youth dance ministry she leads:

“While I originally wanted to suspend any activity for the youth dance ministry out of fear of not being able to produce anything, God gave vision...God allowed me to surprise myself when I worked with an editor in making the very first liturgical dance video for my traditional Baptist church, where technology is still our work in progress. When I saw other dance ministries quickly pivot to produce videos, I did not think the same was meant for us until I surrendered the idea of "quit first, never try" and allowed God to make connections and give me the organization to creatively pursue a way to spread hope.’’⁶¹

Dance was made possible through technological innovation and being willing to minister and create in new ways. Similar to Participant 2, Participant 4 and Participant 5 also used technology to continue the work of their ministries. Participant 4 stated:

⁶⁰ Interview with Participant 3.

⁶¹ Survey from Participant 2.

“During the pandemic after much prayer and fasting, and I have a great team of teachers and advisors that helped me, we did not stop. The only thing that we stopped was contact like in person contact. We continued on Zoom, and we still had our concert via Zoom...We rented out a space where it was just family and friends and just us, so we would still be under the regulations for COVID-19...But God was like keep going. And many people [had a] testimony [that] was like ‘thank you for keep going.’ ‘Thank you for giving me an outlet because I was stuck in the house.’ And so we utilized Zoom to you know to meet...to talk to the teens, to talk to anybody that needed to talk...So we utilized Zoom to our best advantage during the pandemic...even though stress was individual, we came collectively...We were able to reach everybody, so if we needed to call a meeting, we were able to call it faster on Zoom and meet, ‘hey how are you coping? How you doing?’ Checking on them was easier for us during the pandemic, so it gave us time to reflect and to draw closer to each other...”⁶²

Similar to the conversation around stress and trauma more broadly, liturgical dance creates a community where people can bring their full selves and their challenges. The community of liturgical dance was especially important during the pandemic in providing a space for coping and healing as well as a place to gather with others. Participant 5 also spoke to the role in community:

“I would say for me it has increased the importance of my ministry...It provided a place of refuge, especially for my older students...we had to phase them into the studio. And so, we spend a lot of time together...And so the pandemic allowed us to step back and see how much the Lord had left in the sense that we had a place that we could come and worship and often, we took it for granted...It was tough for our teenagers to really

⁶² Interview with Participant 4.

process that, and Zoom didn't allow that same personal connection. And so, we're still working back through those personal connections.”⁶³

Again, liturgical dance provided a sense of community as well as a time to reflect on the move of God in one's life.

Body, Spirit, and Community in Liturgical Dance

Liturgical Dance & the Movement of the Body

Within my surveys and interviews, I explored the significance of the movement of the body, the significance of faith and the working of the Spirit, and the significance of the community in dance. Participant 1 discussed the movement of the body in relation to telling a story: “Slow sustained movements will draw your attention to the words or the base of the songs. Fast, upbeat songs draw your attention to the face. Are you smiling, crying, frowning, or angry? Sustained movements can bring someone peace and certainty in a chaotic moment of life; upbeat can bring someone joy and happiness in a depressed moment of life.”⁶⁴ In this discussion, the movement of the body is shaped by the song and its tempo, but it is meant to communicate a message. Participant 3 also uplifts this in discussing dance and movement as a language: “Dance is a language. We're always speaking...”⁶⁵ Participant 5 also contributes to the discussion of dance as communicating a message. Furthermore, dance involves the entire body. This discussion of the entirety of one's body is also present in the response of Participant 1, although less explicitly. In bringing these themes together, Participant 5 states:

“I am a firm believer that liturgical dance requires the whole body. Oftentimes I think, when we think about dance, we only think about our arms or our legs but for me, it is the

⁶³ Interview with Participant 5.

⁶⁴ Survey from Participant 1.

⁶⁵ Interview with Participant 3.

whole body that is coming together to convey a message. And sometimes the message isn't always outward. Sometimes, the message is inward... You can't do something with your arm without being cognizant of your face... They all connect and they all, in my opinion, should connect because there should be some intentionality to a person bringing their full self, and their full self is not just limited in a mental state or emotional state, but it is also in a physical state that we bring our full selves to that place.”⁶⁶

In order to communicate the message in dance, the dancers must bring their full selves.

It's also worth noting that while I asked about the body, the Spirit, and the movement of the body separately, they often interact, and this is evident in the response of Participant 2. Participant 2 spoke to being used by God “in the act of praise and worship through movement.” She goes on to say:

“Prophetic dance and movement has healing properties. When and if God has anointed you to go forth and dance for healing, He supplies certain movements that I cannot actually put into words that cause a shift in the internal and external atmospheres. Whether an arm raise or covering motion brings a wave of release and deliverance over the congregation or ourselves, I lead with a belief that liturgical dance is the kinesthetic motion of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one who activates the healing, however. We cannot force it.”⁶⁷

The body and Spirit are connected in liturgical dance as I discuss more in the coming sections.

It is also important to consider the movement of the body in relation to fitness.

Dancing can physically help one feel better in addition to the role it plays emotionally and

⁶⁶ Interview with Participant 5.

⁶⁷ Survey from Participant 2.

psychologically. Participant 4 shared not only about the health and wellness impact but also the implications for those with physical and intellectual disabilities:

“...So even if you're in a wheelchair, you can still benefit from dance because it brings so much joy from within, so I feel like we dance from inside out versus outwardly first, because once you hear the beat, it's in the soul...It helps the body to cope even if you're stressed and I can see it because I work with kids with special needs. I love to see the joy in their face because they don't even have to get the steps right. Just by moving it'll allow you to release so many bad feelings or emotions off you...and if you have any pain, you can do different stress stretches for it. It just [has] so many benefits for the body...I will recommend dance to anybody, because it will help you physically, mentally, emotionally, psychologically, and, everything, spiritually...it would just help you holistically.”⁶⁸

Again, dance is a holistic practice that not only involves the entire body but benefits the entire body. As such, the physical movement of the body in dance is significant when considering the coping and healing properties of liturgical dance. There is healing offered in the movement itself as I'll discuss more in the next chapter.

Liturgical Dance & the Role of the Spirit

Faith and the connection to the Spirit and God is one of the most important factors that distinguishes liturgical dance from other forms of dance. Faith works alongside the movement of the body and the community in the coping and healing process. Participant 1 shared, “Without faith, nothing goes as the Lord intended for it to! Spiritually, people can tell when something is forced, genuine, or for performance or show. When you genuinely dance to minister, you can help someone overcome an obstacle or a trial in their life simply by your

⁶⁸ Interview with Participant 4.

body's language..."⁶⁹ Liturgical dance is a ministry, not a performance. Participant 3 echoes Participant 1 in explaining:

"I believe we serve the type of God where the scripture says "worship God in spirit and in truth." And so when I think about dance and how faith ties to that, one has to answer the question: Who is it for? And ultimately, I would say that for those individuals who look at liturgical dance with the language of audience and things of that nature, I would then push them to say, well, if we want to use that terminology, then everyone should have like an audience of one and the people, whoever is viewing, they get the overflow because I believe what happens in private will come out in public in due time..."⁷⁰

Faith is not only the motivation for liturgical dance, but there is a belief that one is being guided by the Spirit in dance. The creation of a ministry piece takes place in communication with God as highlighted by Participant 2: "Faith and spirituality are the foundational key to liturgical dance...Bible reading, prayer, worship are all necessary in the journey of a liturgical dancer...For example, I believe the choreography of dances, uses of pageantry (banners, streamers, flags), selection of garments, selection of music, must be God-breathed. As in, He has to have the first and final say of all decision making when preparing to minister."⁷¹

Participant 4 shares a similar sentiment as it relates to God guiding the development of the ministry piece:

"If He's not the one that's leading me, I don't even want it, and I have made that vow. And I'm serious about this vow because most of the time, I don't know what I'm doing. And it's not because I'm not prepared...The reason I'm saying that is because I remember, God, when I

⁶⁹ Survey from Participant 1.

⁷⁰ Interview with Participant 3.

⁷¹ Survey from Participant 2.

became serious with this gift, that He blessed me with, I sat down, and I'm like, I didn't even go to school to dance. Even though I loved it. God did not allow me to get my dance degree. God did not allow me to master in it. My degree is in psychology. My minor is in sociology. My Master's is in theology... Why didn't you lead me to get a degree in dance God? And he told me, and I believe that with all my heart, he said, because I didn't want no one to prostitute you. I didn't want no one to look at your credentials and think that they can do whatever with you. I led you to this people, to that person for you to learn and then use it for my glory... Because I channel Him, He's my choreographer. He's my deliverer. e's the one that gives me the idea. He's the visionary, so if he's not doing it, I don't want to be nowhere around it.”⁷²

I'll also share Participant 5's response as it also speaks to the guiding of the Spirit:

“Oh, it's no way to experience the fullness of the communion that happens when you dance before the Lord without faith... There's no way. There's no liturgical dance without Him. It really is a communion with you and the Lord, and it's something that's sacred. Like there's a moment when I'm dancing when the dance stops and the ministry begins, and I can't tell you exactly, when it happens. Like yes, you walk up and you're physically moving, but there's this other thing that happens in the spirit realm where it transitions. And the ministry is able to come forth where it's no longer about the steps, and it's about the message that you're conveying in that moment. And then, even that the message is sometimes outside of the choreography and the music because it is personal with you and the Lord. So, it is a conversation. I can have choreography, that is set, but in that moment, it can shift and move out of the way because it is a conversation that it's happening in real time with the Lord.”⁷³

⁷² Interview with Participant 4.

⁷³ Interview with Participant 5.

Hence many participants speak to something that happens in liturgical dance that is beyond words and that they accredit to the work of the Spirit. Additionally, Participant 2 brings attention to the importance of one's private life as discussed by Participant 3. Both iterate that there must be a personal spiritual discipline or certain spiritual preparation that takes place when one ministers through dance. To know what the Spirit is communicating and also to give oneself over in the moment to being used by God in liturgical dance, one must have a strong relationship with God.

Liturgical Dance & the Community

While there are many aspects of liturgical dance that could have been discussed, I ended my discussion of different aspects with the topic of community. In asking about community, there were different responses as a result of different interpretations of "community." Community included the community of dancers, community of Christians, the community in which one lives, and the community of those who witness dance. As it relates to the community of dancers, Participant 1 shared, "Yes, they show me that dance is more than just technique, choreography, concerts, and outreach. It is building long lasting relationships, friendships, saving lives, and bring people closer to Christ."⁷⁴ Participant 5 also addressed the community of liturgical dancers:

"I think the community of liturgical dance is one that is still growing. I think it is important...I've seen a shift in probably the last ten or fifteen years to an emphasis on technique, and I believe the greatest dance is one of those choreographed by the Lord that it's not just technique. And I think that dance ministers are trying to come back to that, that genuine worship before God that is open to all of us through movement, regardless of

⁷⁴ Survey from Participant 1.

who you are, your training, your technique. We're all called to worship and whether we lift our hands or we sway, we are a natural beings who move and movement is a part of what we do”⁷⁵

Participant 2 spoke of the community of dancers: “If God has placed you with the "right" community, He can use your relationship with the fellow dancers to help you grow and strengthen your faith. As God doesn't intend for us to live in loneliness, a community of liturgical dancers is designed to be a network of uplift and support.”⁷⁶ Participant 3 discussed those who witness the ministry through dance as the community: “I think the community comes in that place to receive after you, and even while you're pouring out to God in liturgical dance...I believe that there should be enough worship happening to where everyone can get something...And then I think also community is important because community in this setting can also tell you when you need to pour back into yourself...”⁷⁷ Participant 4 spoke of community in relation to outreach:

“The role of community is love God, love people because Jesus came to die for all of us...if people are important to God, then people have to be important to the community...If I don't give back to my community, what's the point of trying to connect? So, I believe that if you have a business within your community, you need to reach out. You have to have some type of faith-based or outreach-based [arm] that reaches out to those in the community...”⁷⁸

While the participants approach community differently, all highlight the importance of community in dance. In addition to one’s connection to God, one must be connected to other

⁷⁵ Interview with Participant 5.

⁷⁶ Survey from Participant 1.

⁷⁷ Interview with Participant 3.

⁷⁸ Interview with Participant 4.

dancers, other Christians, those in the community in which they live, and those who will witness their ministry.

Reflections on Liturgical Dance as a Coping & Healing Practice

The final question asked of each participant centered around their thoughts and reflections on liturgical dance as a coping and healing practice for Black Christian women. Participant 1 shared about liturgical dance as a means of “release,” expressing emotions positively, and sharing one’s testimony as “You never know. Maybe someone is going through the same struggles you are and you may have helped them from committing something as disastrous as suicide.”⁷⁹ Participant 2 also shared about “release” and expressing emotions as well as “relief” and “joy.” It is helpful on processing stress and trauma, and there is a spiritual significance: “...the act of worship through dance allows me to surrender my problem to God and place any situation in His covering.”⁸⁰ Additionally, Participant 3 shared about liturgical dance’s ability to express one’s self, especially as it relates to words we may not be able to say or even pray: “Sometimes you don't have the words to say, and sometimes you don't have the prayer to utter. Sometimes you can't even explain to the dancers how you're feeling but there may be moments where you can just enact through your body how you feel and there's no right or wrong way. That's the other beauty of dance. You don't have to think about it as detailed as you do with your words, like, did I say it the right way? Did I articulate it the way I wanted to? No, dance is like, this is it.”⁸¹ Not only is their spiritual significance, but Participant 4 suggests that it is one’s relationship with God that allows liturgical dance to have coping and healing properties. Participant 4 said, “I believe that we can gain a lot from liturgical dance because the

⁷⁹ Survey from Participant 1.

⁸⁰ Survey from Participant 2.

⁸¹ Interview with Participant 3.

focus is on Christ...The focus should be on Christ because the scripture speaks about wherever the Spirit of God is, there is liberty. And I really believe that, if Christ is in liturgical dance and the leader is a believer, you will get set free of whatever you're dealing with. It will help you cope. It will help you build a relationship, like the women that I deal with...You have a more sense of how to deal with people. You have sense of wellness and fitness. It's just...the holistic of the person will benefit.”⁸² As such, there is coping and healing power in dance’s ability to release and express oneself, even that which one may not be able to communicate with words, and in the freedom offered by God in liturgical dance, recognizing that faith is required for liturgical dance.

Both Participant 3 and Participant 5 also discussed liturgical dance as a coping and healing practice for Black Christian women in relation to its historical significance for African and African American people. Participant 3 said of this, “...And so, I do think it is definitely a space for all women and definitely Black women...because I know even like our ancestors, they had to dance their way through trauma and grief and heartache, and they were not skilled, and they were not able to read and write and have all the luxuries that we have today. And so, they had to find other mechanisms to communicate.”⁸³ Similar to that shared as it relates to liturgical dance as a coping and healing practice today, it was a way for our ancestors as well to express their “trauma, grief and heartache.”⁸⁴

Participant 5 stated:

“I do think, for African Americans specifically, I think that dance speaks to us. I think [it’s in] our roots as people with ancestry in the continent of Africa. Dance is so

⁸² Interview with Participant 4.

⁸³ Interview with Participant 3.

⁸⁴ Interview with Participant 4.

embedded in every part of life and culture. It is not something that is a separate. That is a very Americanized way of looking at it. Whether it is birthday, celebrations, marriages, you see those things as part of dancing, a part of our culture. And so, I think for African American women, we do tend to gravitate naturally into those things just based on our cultural roots and ways that we have expressed ourselves here specifically in the Americas because drumming and different things were taken away from the slaves and their language. Dance gave them a way of communicating, even a lot of the rhythmic patterns that you find in black music are rhythmic patterns brought here to the Americas from slaves. And so, I think, you know, we have a unique connection to the movement and the music like traditional gospel music in liturgical dance.”⁸⁵

For Participant 5, it is dance that is a part of our cultural expression as African American women, especially as it relates to communicating with God, oneself, and others as has been previous communicated.

The responses of the five participants uplift the aspects of liturgical dance that make it a great avenue for coping and to facilitate healing in Black Christian women. They shared from out of their own experiences and that of others they know. In the next section, I’ll discuss these reflects in relation to previously mentioned research that informs this work.

Chapter Three: Utilizing Liturgical Dance as a Pastoral Care Coping & Healing Practice in the Black Church

While all people participate in liturgical dance, some of the responses of those who participated in surveys and interviews for this project highlighted the importance of dance in the Black Church context specifically. As such, one of the reasons liturgical dance is a good pastoral

⁸⁵ Interview with Participant 5.

care coping and healing practice in the Black Church is because dance is a part of the culture. As discussed previously, in reflecting on liturgical dance, it is also important to consider African American dance studies and Black performance theory. There is a connection to the spirit and the soul in dance, and dance is able to serve as a means of release and expression for Black people in the United States throughout history.

In addition to the cultural context, the movement of the body itself allows for coping and healing. Some respondents discuss that there is a health and wellness and fitness aspect to the movement of the body in dance, and it is also a means to release embodied trauma as discussed in the first chapter. Dance works to promote holistic healing in bringing awareness to the connection of the body, mind, soul, and spirit. For Black Christian women who do liturgical dance, the role of God or the Spirit is of paramount importance; the Christian context for liturgical dance is also significant. The responses report the previously discussed studies on the role of faith and religious communities in mediating stress and trauma. For Black Christian women who do liturgical dance, much of the coping and healing comes in utilizing one's faith to navigate what one may experience. Thus, liturgical dance is often partnered with prayer or is perceived to be prayer itself. It is the power of God at work in the dancer that allows one to be healed. As such, when one experiences a moment of stress and trauma, one can turn to liturgical dance.

One not only turns to liturgical dance but the liturgical dance community. The experiences shared about the role of dance amid the pandemic highlight the importance of the liturgical dance community for its practitioners. The dance community itself provides a space to release and a space where one can work to process stress and trauma. In this regard, dance is an outlet for the individual that is done well in community. Liturgical dance can express the

emotions of others and can spectators who have similar experiences. This takes place through every element of liturgical dance, such as the attire, choreography, and song selection, and it takes place at concerts, in church services, and even in the dance rehearsals themselves.

Developing a Pastoral Care Liturgical Dance Practice

While I have discussed liturgical dance in relation to coping and healing, I want to take time to develop what this might look like as a pastoral care practice in the Black Church. Similar to the women's groups shared by Participant 4, pastoral care as a liturgical dance practice would take place in a small group of Black Christian women. In some regards, it would be like that developed in church spaces around grief and loss and other similarities. Black Christian women would regularly gather and bring their stress and trauma and their full selves into the space. While this often takes place in liturgical dance communities, this would be a space for Black Christian women who may not participate in dance, but are nevertheless, interested in embodied healing practices.

Because community is a significant aspect as it relates to coping and healing through liturgical dance, the first stage of the process and journey would include activities that can promote and facilitate the development of community. Like dialogue spaces, the goal is to create a space where people can be honest and vulnerable and know that their stories will be held with respect and in confidence. This sense of community would develop organically during the process, yet it is still important to establish intentions upfront and ensure that everyone has the same understanding of the space that is being created and cultivated.

Next, the women would receive an overview of liturgical dance. They would be provided with a discussion of its history and context as it relates to how it has been used in contemporary church spaces. This context would pay attention to the role of dance as both a Christian practice

and a Black practice. They would also be provided with information centering dance in relation to healing and how liturgical dance can be connected to embodied psychology, somatics, and dance movement therapy. This overview would make clear that liturgical dance is being offered as one means of coping with and healing from stress and trauma. As such, it can work alongside other means such as going to therapy or receiving counseling and praying. Thus, the leader of the group will have resources and people they can reference as it relates to other means of care. While this will take place within a group in the Black Church setting, they are welcome to incorporate liturgical dance as a spiritual discipline and coping and healing practices in their private lives as well. Furthermore, the overview would speak to the significance of each aspect as it relates to the movement of the body, the importance of one's faith, and the role of the community they will be cultivating in their group.

After the overview, there will be an activity that works to connect the women to all parts of themselves: body, mind, soul, and spirit. One can think of this as a liturgy that works to set the atmosphere. It may be a prayer, a reading, a meditative moment, or a body scan. The purpose of this is to get the women to think intently about their bodies, what it carries and holds as well as the way it moves. It will also serve as an avenue to get them to think about the Spirit and God's presence in their lives. This is important because faith is what contributes to liturgical dance being a strong coping and healing practice.

Next, the women will be invited to express themselves through words or the movement of the body. They are welcome to tell their own stories through dance or invite others to tell their stories through dance. The leader will begin with an example, and the women will be invited to move as they feel led. One person will go at a time out of respect and a desire to honor the stories and experiences of women in the room. There is a goal of developing a womanist ethic of care

and healing within the space. While all are welcome to share, sharing is not compulsory.

Once those who desire to have shared, the session will end with another liturgy to close out the space followed by a debrief. The debrief will assess how the women feel leaving the space in contrast to when they entered. It will also provide an opportunity for them to address their needs as it relates to sustained coping and healing. What do they need from themselves? What would they ask of the community? The leader will be encouraged to check-in with the participants regularly, paying attention to the needs that were communicated. They would leave the space, hopefully, with a deeper understanding of liturgical dance as a coping and healing practice and with something that they can replicate in other spaces.

Questions For Continued Exploration

As it relates to what I have discussed, there are questions that arise as it relates to this practice. One question centers time. Is this a practice where women attend one session or attend as needed or is this something that they should engage in regularly? I would suggest that given the temptations of TheStrongBlackWoman trope, I would offer that this could take place biweekly or once a month. As life experiences and moments cause stress and trauma, it would be helpful to know that there is a place that one can go to release it all and express themselves with the support and affirmation of a community of people who may be able to understand what they are going through.

Additional questions pertain to the target group and setting. What might liturgical dance offer other communities as it relates to coping and healing? For example, would Black Christian men benefit from the practice in similar ways? Additionally, there is a need to navigate the politics and complexities of church as an institution. While this work can take place within Black Church institutions, there may also be a need to create spaces for this work outside of the Church

institution as it is important to recognize that not all Black Christian women may be connected to an institutional church body. Additionally, the institutional church may be the source of stress, harm, and trauma for them. Moreover, while I am focused on Black Christian women, how might the target be expanded? Would liturgical dance be helpful for Black Christian women who practice other religions? Given the significance of faith, would it be possible to have Black Christian women who may be atheist or agnostic participate? These questions may be worth exploring in future work and research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, liturgical dance should be adopted as a coping and healing pastoral care practice for Black Christian women in the Black. Those who participate in liturgical dance bear witness to the healing possibilities and its significance, especially as it relates to personal, racial, and pandemic-related stress and trauma. In moments of crisis, such as a pandemic, liturgical dance can provide release and a means of expressing oneself as well as a much-needed community. Thus, Black Churches should consider adding liturgical dance to their list of pastoral care options.

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