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Beyond Pathology: A Critical Review of the Literature on Black Female Sexuality, Twerk, and DMT

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Dance/Movement Therapy

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Abstract

This thesis uses a dance/movement therapy investigative and critical lens to examine the controversial twerking phenomenon. This literature review investigates twerk's historical, embodied, and hyperlocal cultural settings as it relates to the stigmatized sexuality of U.S. Black women, the history and effects of oversexualizing Black female sexuality that influences twerk's negative review, the dance/movement therapy field's cultural movement bias, and dance/movement therapy's potential as a therapeutic intervention for Black women. Racial and sexual socialization of Black female sexuality is found to be attributed to twerk's negative review and its existence as an embodied form of resistance and liberation. In examining twerk, recommendations are made for dance/movement therapy in engaging and further expanding cultural movement competency, sexuality/sensuality discourse, and utilizing of twerk and pelvic regional movement as a potential intervention for Black women.

Keywords: twerk, respectability politics, Black female sexuality, Black women, African American, cultural interventions, bias, oppression, appropriation, ratchet culture, sexuality, dance/movement therapy

Beyond Pathology: A Critical Review of the Literature on Black Female Sexuality, Twerk, and DMT

In entering my last year in dance movement therapy graduate studies, I realized that topics of sexual/sensual movement are not addressed in the curriculum and clinical conversation. Another more prominent observation is that movement that initiates from the pelvis, hips, and butt (PHB) is usually glossed over and seen as an area never to be referenced for possible reminders of sexual violence trauma. I find this concerning as there are dance and cultural movement sensibilities that highlight these areas and there are assumptions existing in U.S. society that hypersexualize these regions of the body and the groups of people that highlight them. In New Orleans, Louisiana, we have a Black cultural dance that highlights the PHB, famously known now as *twerking*.

Since its rise in international popularity in 2013, the dance style has influenced controversy and discourse on the use of the dance and the people who engage in it (Toth, 2017). Its critical review has historical and contemporary ties to negative stereotypes of Black female sexuality. From a respectability politics view (Higginbotham, 1992), overt sexual expressions are seen as unacceptable and as a result, Black women are policed, objectified, discriminated against, and oversexualized while their lighter toned or non-Black peers can appropriate it for financial and/or social advancement (Donaldson, 2020). Despite its negative reception, twerk has been argued to disrupt the balance of unquestioned societal norms in the United States while being utilized for feminism and the liberation of Black women (Love, 2017).

This literature review investigates the historical, embodied, and hyperlocal cultural landscapes of twerking, history of Black female sexuality, mental and physical effects of embodied racial and sexual socialization on Black women, and dance/movement therapy (DMT) and its potential for investigation and intervention of twerk and counteracting societal hypersexual bias.

Literature Review

Black Female Sexuality

Historically, Europe and its social constructs have had a significant influence in the construction of the false/mystified sexual marginalization of Black women. While the oversexualization, exploitation, and policing of women's bodies are not exclusive to one ethnic group, the intersectional experience of Black women raises specific considerations and sensitivity in the world-wide anti-Black views and systems of their oppression and will be discussed in this section.

Intersectional Links

The varying intersecting marginalized identities of Black women from the African continent was a central focus within the formation and upholding of the White European standards within colonization and slavery. Akeia Benard (2016) positions, "race/class/gender link has always been a fundamental arena of economic exploitation of women's bodies in colonialism" (p. 6).

In considering the social identity surrounding race, European assessments of Black African bodies since the early 15th century have been filled with "intense ideological meaning" (Benard, 2016, p. 6). These portrayals included many negative descriptors of Black Africans like *grotesque*, *unnatural*, *obscene* and *sexually promiscuous*. Both the physical and social sciences also produced racially motivated and now disproven evidence that African people have less than average intelligence, high pain tolerance, uncontrollable sex drives, and are in need of colonial intervention (DeGruy, 2017). These efforts created the view that involvement of any kind is justifiable and needed for their salvation (DeGruy, 2017).

In considering the social identity surrounding class, Africans were historically regarded as less than human. This transcended during slavery wherein bodies of enslaved Africans in the Americas were not seen as their own but property of their masters leaving them without human rights (Benard, 2016). This aided in the justifications and commodification of rape, murder, inhumane labor, medical

experimental abuse, torture, and enslavement, and particularly the start and retention of the sex economy of Black women (DeGruy, 2017).

In considering the social identity surrounding gender, Black women were a fundamental building block of U.S. American society through the sex economy (Benard, 2016; Davis, 2013). The sex economy was made up of Indigenous and Black women, as using poor White people was seen as a threat to White superiority (Benard, 2016). Unlike their Indigenous counterparts or other slave economics, enslaved African women in the U.S. were compelled to work beyond traditional gender roles, performing every form of productive labor, sexual and reproductive (Davis, 2013). This made enslaved Black women significant in the sustainment of the U.S. workforce by working in field labor, domestic labor, sexual labor to White men, and reproducing more slaves. Even though Black women and girls were mainly sold for productive labor, a sex market still flourished. In the “fancy-girl” market, primarily in the South, enslaved women were more often than not sold for the specific purpose of sex. Davis (2013) describes fancy as “selling the right to rape a special category of women marked out as unusually desirable” (p. 459).

By the 19th century the U.S. government started adopting laws to protect non-Black women’s sexuality against rape and offer access to patriarchal protection, which further sustained and made rape legal towards enslaved African women and criminalized any resistance to rape or protection from anyone other than their owners. While women of color were victims to this kind of treatment, the enslavement, pursuit of domination, and devaluation of Black people’s humanity forever linked Black women to the subjugation of the White male gaze and the imposition of sexual authority (Davis, 2003).

Saartjie “Sara” Baartman

Saartjie “Sara” Baartman’s, aka Hottentot Venus’s, story has been cited a great deal throughout history. Baartman is claimed to be the epicenter of the Eurocentric ideas of Black female sexuality in medical and scientific research (Mowatt et al., 2013). Baartman is also recognized as one of the first

Black women subjugated to human sex-trafficking and has been arguably the most highly publicized and exploited Black woman in history. Born in South Africa around late 1780's, Saartjie was a Khoikhoi woman who grew up on a colonial farm. When her husband was killed by Dutch colonists, Baartman was sold into slavery and later falsely enslaved under contract with inaccurate personal information that forced her to be enslaved for her entire life. Baartman's body was exhibited throughout Paris and London (Mowatt et al., 2013).

Black African women, like the Khoikhoi women, were socially and historically known to have naturally augmented curves in their hips, thighs, and buttocks. European fashion in the Victorian era was centered around emphasizing women's backsides with big bows and decorated bustles (Shrimpton, 2016). While a huge *derriere* was fashionable, Baartman's natural body type was thought to align more with animalistic features than with Eurocentric human features. Baartman was routinely gawked at and sexually abused by patrons. Her curves were regarded as monstrous. While she stirred the audiences, her very presence threatened them. The Black female body was both exoticized and objectified. Scientists like anatomists, zoologists, naturalists, and physiologists studied her during and after her death. Findings stated Baartman's breasts, *derriere*, and genitalia were considered extraordinary, as her physiology was used to reaffirm and justify the false narrative created by Eurocentric standards that Black African women's bodies were exotic, oversexed, and inferior (Mowatt et al., 2013).

After her death in 1815, Baartman's body parts were displayed in the Musée de l'Homme, which translates to the Museum of Man, until 1974 and kept in Paris until 2002 when her remains, after protest, were returned to her homeland of South Africa (Salesa, 2011). The racial scientific evidence made by European science elites of the 19th century justified the idea that Africans were not in control of their bodies and needed White ownership, colonization, and domination. These stereotypes evolved and became attributed to all African women (Toth, 2017; Salesa, 2011). Baartman's horrific lived

experience serves as an historical marker for the context of how Black women's bodies are viewed as hypersexual and still used today for indecent projections and financial consumption.

White Female Dichotomy

Black women, who were more often than not enslaved, were seen as a threat to White women and the White family model during colonial times. In the Americas, White male patriarchy sexually exploited women of color through rape and systems of concubinage, producing bi-racial children while they were marrying White women. The accepted concubinage subsided due to the growing bi-racial population, and the focus switched to the colonial dynamic of suitable White wife and "legitimate children" (Benard, 2016, p. 3).

This did not, however, discourage White men from continuing their sexual objectification of Black women, mainly their female African slaves, and instead helped create the idea that Black women are only useful for sex creating the cultural notion of "who can bed, who can wed" (Stoler, 1989, as cited in Benard, 2016, p. 2). White men's preoccupation with Black women bred jealousy and hatred within White women. To maintain their status, support, and protection from White men, they aligned with investment in the oppression of Black women and became the "moral guardians" of their male superiors (Benard, 2016, p. 3). White women, specifically White plantation women, were seen as marriageable and upheld attributes of pure respectability, such as righteous, moral, and self-sacrificing mothers whose sexuality was almost entirely linked to maternity (Benard, 2016, p. 3).

The laws adopted to protect White women's sexuality, served to create a further dichotomy between Black and White women. Unfortunately, the womanhood of women of color, particularly Black women, was still used for sex but received an undesired reputation that deemed them unfit to wed, unclean, and incapable of respect. These asymmetrical relationships maintained White European patriarchal control and White Europeans as the standard ideal race (Benard, 2016).

Black Female Sexual Pathology

Continued negative views of enslaved Black women existed in racist science findings justifying forced sterilization (Prather et al., 2018) and rape (Davis, 2013). Within mainstream media (Higginbotham, 1992; McGruder, 2019) and the porn industry (Benard, 2016), the reframed narratives of Black female sexuality are often represented in slurring Black femininity in the emasculation of the Black man (hooks, 2004) and pathologizing Black female sexual behavior by its instantaneous visible, hyper visible, invisible presence in dominant discourse (Hammonds, 2017).

Black Community Response

In order to better align with social advancement and humane treatment, non-White and communities of color discovered that embodying the White heteronormative middle-class expectations of respectability was an appropriate survival tactic if Eurocentric aesthetic features weren't available (Lee & Hicken, 2016). This behavior, described as respectability politics, was a code of conduct people of color have historically used to maintain a *respectable* and socially affirming image to counteract the negative stereotypes attributed to them (Higginbotham, 1992). The Black church is observed as, and often times described as, a central source of reinforcing these Eurocentric normative values and has implemented distinctive identifiers of respectable and non-respectable public appearance and behavior (Lomax, 2018).

There are also multiple accounts in scientific and mainstream media of African Americans attempting to dissipate negative tropes by showing stories of navigating and behaving in ways that validates their right to credibility, as well as their right to education, work, living, and their overall existence (Lee & Hicken, 2016). Black women, to counteract the history of sexual violence and false stereotypes as sexual deviants undeserving of protection or respect, presented themselves as modest, docile, and sexually pure to align with White women aesthetics. This involved wearing long layers of

clothing, being sexually non-expressive, and working to appear non-threatening (Lomax, 2018; Pitcan et al., 2018).

During the Reconstruction era within the Civil Rights Movement, Black female activists also responded by encouraging the performance of respectability politics, sexual control, and public silence (Higginbotham, 1992). The result was to sway the narrative; unfortunately, the inflicted harm on Black women persisted and Black women continued to be unable to articulate their sexuality (Higginbotham, 1992). Gender and class also play a substantial role in respectability politics as Black working and lower classes were routinely criticized and even ostracized for their disproportionate structural inequality and inability to perform respectability politics without acknowledgement of the effects of racist and classist historical accounts and institutions (Pitcan et al., 2018).

Respectability politics has been criticized for its evolution into a minority policing mechanism that is more divisive than unified. Pitcan et al. (2018) identified three main facets of respectability politics' imperfect structure: (a) it reinforces an inner group social class hierarchy to contrast a "respectable us against a shameful other" (p. 165); (b) it endorses values that opposes and negates negative stereotypes creating an unyielding dominant narrative; and, (c) it involves the practice of aligning with the White middle-class through "impression management" which are "people's attempts to control how others perceive them" (p. 166). Respectability politics relies on the individual's regulation of their public self-behavior and appearance to serve the larger groups desire to conform sometimes at the expense of the individual. This accepts and reinforces White Eurocentric culture as standard and, instead of erasing negative stereotypes, respectability politics upholds them and justifies harm to Black Americans (Lee & Hicken, 2016).

Contemporary Exploitation and Appropriation

As whiteness has been historically centered as the standard for success in the U.S., Black women are treated in direct opposition and routinely corrected to align with Eurocentric beauty features

inclusive of “long straight hair, light or white skin tones” (Donaldson, 2020, p. 12). Despite the horrific history of objectifying Black women’s bodies under Eurocentric desired aesthetics, Black women’s aesthetics have become popular in mainstream pop culture wherein lighter skin toned Black women and non-Black women are being celebrated and credited for having “curvy hips, thick lips, ample bosoms and large behinds” (p. 12) while maintaining their proximity to whiteness. Their influence has unfairly set the unconscious standard for when, what, and how Black woman features are accepted and deemed attractive while Black women are routinely shamed for possessing these features naturally. This standard has also influenced Black women who do not possess either the standard White or stereotypical Black body features to modify their own bodies through measures that include, but are not limited to, cosmetic surgery, body-modifying (Ashley & Jung, 2017), chemical hair straightening, and skin bleaching (Hunter, 2011) to align to these standards (Donaldson, 2020).

The historical marginalization of Black women formed and affirmed these negative stereotypes which are provided in Appendix A as well as a continual practice of negatively depicting Black women in just about every system or industry, namely media, beauty, politics, law enforcement, entertainment, and so forth. Black women’s cultural features like their body, hair, fashion, and language/vernacular are often shown to be less attractive and in need of correction unless a woman or person from the dominant race appropriates it, thus making it popular (Balanda, 2020). The Era of the Big Booty (Kendal, 2014) became fashionable once lighter toned skinned Black women and non-Black women were praised in the U.S. for possessing large butts, taking on a sexual element of the Black female body while still being accepted by European beauty standards (Kendal, 2014). The appropriation of non-Black, mainly White Eurocentric women, trying on these features, styles, or socio-cultural beauty practices without as much scrutiny was reflective of their privilege and social freedom to navigate their sexuality freely while Black women are more readily policed (Donaldson, 2020).

Within modern day culture, Black women's sexuality has often been objectified for sexual dominance and power. In hip hop, Black male artists historically have used sexually charged lyrics in their music and have been widely criticized for being "demeaning and damaging" (Heller, 2020. p. 4) to women, as the representation of scantily clad voluptuous Black women engaging in sexualized behavior, inclusive of sexual touching and grinding, is a socio-cultural measure that is frequently utilized to display their own masculine success through the attainment of money, sex, and material dominance (Heller, 2020). Black female hip hop artists have chosen to either own or reject this practice of sexual objectification and in recent years have risen in popularity bringing in their own counterresponses to sexual dominance and integrated social commentary about the disproportionality and reclamation of Black female sexuality (Heller, 2020; Oniah, 2015). Unfortunately, no matter how sexually expressive or inexpressive Black female artists present, their sexuality will be placed under heavy scrutiny in the widely male dominated genres (Heller, 2020) of rap and hip hop. Despite the many historical and contemporary sexual embodied experiences of Black women mentioned here and beyond the scope of this paper, Black women have found different ways of celebrating themselves and challenging negative notions of them. One such medium is that of twerking.

Twerk

Twerk is a Black social dance that has originated in the hyperlocal Black music and dance scene in New Orleans, Louisiana since the 1990s. Strip clubs, hip hop artists, and relocated New Orleanians further spread the term and dance style for decades. In 2013, when pop singer and celebrity Miley Cyrus *twerked* (heavily debated as an incorrect display of this social dance style; Gaunt, 2015) in front of an international live audience, it prompted mainstream exposure and controversy. From my observations in New Orleans, on YouTube before and after 2011, and through social media, I have observed that twerk has become a generalized international term to identify African influenced booty-shaking dances which highlight the fleshy part of the dancer's derriere. It is also important to note that Black women are

not a monolith and claims and connections to twerk are not accepted by all Black people or African Americans.

To commence this conversation regarding twerk, I want to start by introducing its cultural music and dance context, New Orleans Bounce. Bounce music and dance is a manifestation of New Orleans Black identity. According to Hall (2012), New Orleans preserved the “most Africanized slave culture in the US” (United States), reflecting its “cultural creolization” (Hall, 2012, as cited in Taylor, 2018, p. 63). New Orleans is known to be a melting pot of diverse cultures including a blend of African, Native American, and Caribbean cultures. Bounce music is known as a type of high energy underground dance music forming in the late 80s and early 90s in New Orleans’ predominately Black housing projects. Its unique sound comes from regional gospel call-and-response, polyrhythmic drumming, second-line brass patterns, three hip hop beats and Mardi Gras Indian chants (Complex News, 2018; Pérez, 2016; Vox, 2018).

Bounce music can be perceived as male dominated and notoriously misogynistic because of its raunchy, aggressive, and sexually charged lyrics towards women (Complex News, 2018; Vox, 2018). This, however, is half the story, as many women and queer men have had immense influence in the subgenre with its bold lyricism going both ways. Early Bounce artists, like Mia X and Cheeky Blakk, and queer artists, Katey Red and Big Freedia, began to repurpose Bounce chants to express their own sexuality, personal identity, and confidence through explicitly bold lyricism that parallel and challenge the misogynistic lyricism of their heteromale counterparts (Complex News, 2018; Mad Decent, 2012; Vox, 2018). Queer artists further promoted a more inclusive environment and safer spaces for women and queer men alike (Taylor, 2018).

New Orleans Bounce Dance

In studying twerk in the first person and viewing music videos of New Orleans Bounce dance, I have identified distinct movement elements of Bounce dance. New Orleans Bounce dance involves

twerk along with other movement techniques and involves both feminine and masculine forms. Bounce dance emphasizes the shoulders, feet, and butt and are performed across genders. Male identifying persons are usually seen displaying fast footwork with shoulder and leg rotations (Elphage, 2010; Flashin, 2016) interchangeably, whilst female identifying and queer men show the same level of musical sophistication emphasizing their shoulders, waist, hips, and butt (Brackett, 2011; NewOrleansBounceMusi, 2011). Elements of improvisation involve playing with levels, style, inversions, flexibility, stamina, and athleticism across genders.

Feminine Bounce dance is often socially referred to as *pussy-poppin*, *twarkin*, *mixin*, *exercisin*, and *shakin*, to name a few references, and involves a dense composite of various dance moves with the emphasized movement of the PHB with a partner, friends, family, or just the self. Validation is given to the dancer's capacity to release the butt muscles while still maintaining control of the movement and show repetitious synchrony with the fast music rhythms. The dance is executed in various positions of the body that includes an upright standing position, an upside-down position (usually a headstand or feet on the wall), and a position near the ground (usually a full squat or split). The legs vary from slight bend, seated bend (mimicking sitting in a chair), and full squat near the ground (with knees pointing outward). The feet react to the movement of the dance as the feet either pedal with the heels up and down, locomote through space, or stay fully planted to achieve full rotations, vibration, or isolations of the PHB. The arms and hands are either flowing freely in the space or supported on a surface like the knees, floor, or wall (Freedia, 2017; Freedia, 2018). The shoulders are commonly involved in the dance as well (Brackett, 2011; NewOrleansBounceMusi, 2011). In masculine Bounce dance, the mover highlights circular rotation of the shoulders and legs (Flashin, 2016), whereas the feminine Bounce dance includes the whole upper body where the shoulders and chest move in exact or alternating speeds of the PHB causing a polycentric dance effect (Brackett, 2011).

In my research and lived experience, Bounce generally has no pre-requirement of needing a large butt to shake as the dance is achieved through the skilled utilization of the PHB. Its body type inclusion is more often than not seen in its performance as female identifying women and queer men of all body types shake within this way (Brackett, 2011; Mad Decent, 2012; UndaGroundSoundz225, 2013). Bounce artist Big Freedia notes in an interview, “Bounce is for everybody. We do it from zero to ninety-nine in New Orleans, from the little babies all the way to our grandmothers” (Gallagher, 2013, as cited in Casey & Eberhardt, 2018).

Other Origins and Parallels

There is a collective memory held within Black communities of movement styles that resemble twerk. It is a part of the African American vernacular of expressive hip and booty shaking dances. I have indicated historical and contemporary African American, African, Caribbean, Afro-Latin descent connections in my research of twerk, its origins, and its parallels in Appendix B. Twerk’s movement sensibilities are a part of the African American and greater African diasporic dance vernacular with many historical predecessors and continuing an extensive tradition of erotic shaking dances in America (Pérez, 2016). Pelvic and bottom-heavy dance are not always inherently seen as sexual and can be accepted in all ages (Pérez, 2016). Bottom centered dances have been labelled throughout time, especially under Eurocentric observation, as sexually perverted or an indicator of lower socio-economic class (Pérez, 2016). Despite public views of these dancers with arrogant indifference, they contest that their dance expression is neither immoral nor vulgar but a celebration of reconnecting with their roots, asserting their own agency (Zink, 2016), and reclaiming their humanity, particularly in times of economic hardship (Hanna, 2010). As Pérez (2016) frames it, these criteria of dances are a way women can “negotiate their relationships with men by dramatizing their desirability, sexual self-sufficiency, and economic independence” (p. 6).

Meanings

Similar to the historical perceptions of Black women tied to their sexuality, twerk has also been one dimensionally tied to being viewed as sexual. Here, I discuss the multiple meanings around the use of twerk dance.

Sexual. Twerk's sexual meaning involves its function as a flirting behavior, sexual expression, and a promotion of pelvic health. West African culture's public communal celebrations of life and health encompass and promote sexuality and fertility (Thompson, 2012). While more studies are needed, twerk's physicality can help build and control targeted muscles that are similar to belly dance in the hips, core, and can strengthen pelvic floor functioning (An et al., 2016). Female identifying twerk influencers and rap artists utilize twerking to showcase their sex appeal, autonomy, and confidence (Moore, 2019; Song, 2020). This sexual confidence is also used as a flirting behavior and a general display of sexual confidence in private and social gatherings. Bounce artist Big Freedia is aware of the reception of twerk as sexual and proclaims to provide a safe space for women,

I definitely bring some stability to women and let them feel free in their space and let them know that they're protected and can be themselves...creating that safe space for the women has always been my thing. Even when I started rapping, if boys were trying to touch the girls on their asses or slapping them on their cheeks, I would protect the girls. I will continue to be that way.
(Rotter, 2015, as cited in Love, 2017)

Unfortunately, out of the three sexual functions, twerk as sexual expression still has been controversial in its audience interpretation.

Spiritual. Twerk can serve as a spiritual function, spiritual practice, or connecting African descendants with their roots and ancestors. New Orleans Bounce culture has its influence in the gospel church tradition (Taylor, 2018). Bounce artist Big Freedia writes in her memoir, "Like church, Bounce gave me a sense of connection . . . It had become a way of transmuting my pain into joy" (Taylor, 2018 p.

72). With its access to the PHB and African movements, twerk is movement for empowering women and displaying resiliency (Perez, 2016; Toth, 2017). PHB is seen as significant in other religious practices as well. PHB movement can circulate chi in Chinese Taoism (Quinn & Wilson, 2020; Madsen, 2012) and chakra energy in Indian's Tantra tradition (Madsen, 2012).

Traditional. Recorded since the early 60's, the Black community has a long tradition of "erotic shaking dances" (Pérez, 2016, p. 5). Twerk can be identified in many Brenda Gottschild's (1998) Africanist Elements. These include the polycentric/polyrhythmic patterns, the vitality and youthful elements of speed, the repetition and stamina involved in marathoning, and crowd participation between the emcee, performing artist, or DJ and dancers in Multiple Foci (Gotschild, 1998).

Public dance displays, like twerk, are an essential part of many West African societies used in daily life, social spiritual, celebratory, political, and aesthetic expressions and acting as a way to "communicate, to reenact history, and to entertain" (Thompson, 2012, p. 11). Dance can function for but is not limited to matrimony, funerals, childbirth, fertility, rain, sun, greeting farewell, plentiful harvest, socializing, and spiritual worship (Thompson, 2012). Every aspect of life expressed through music and dance throughout the African diaspora has a "democratic equality of body parts" (Gotschild, 2003, p. 15), meaning any part of the body can act as the center and initiation of the dance. Because of this free movement association, it is not unusual for expressions of sensuality and sexuality to evolve from the PHB. This is not seen as overt or hyper-visible but a healthy part of West African cultural aesthetic and tradition. An example of this is the Zimbabwe fertility dance, *Jerusarema* (Asante, 1985). Unfortunately, translation of African dance and their overall movement aesthetics gets simplified routinely in White Eurocentric observations, originating from their own sexually restrictive cultural view and fetishization of African people (Hanna, 2010). This has resulted in colonists, religious missionaries, and assimilating African nations condemning and suppressing erotic movements in African movement reflecting in politics and culture (Thompson, 2012).

Social. Before social media spaces, twerk existed in a socially circumscribed atmosphere in New Orleans' lower socio-income neighborhoods performed by both children and adults and seen in many social and celebratory events. Halliday (2020) regards twerk as a form of Black girls play that can be seen as a tool for the development of Black girls' self independently and in community. In its social context, twerk and twerk-like social dance navigates through the approvals from respectability politics as its presence rests on the distinction between being viewed as "impromptu, collective participatory dance" (Pérez, 2016, p. 5) and "presentational or stage dance" (p. 5). Children, usually girls, are permitted to engage in it, as it is seen as "conveying humor, flexibility, control, and creative talent" (p. 5). There are times when respectability politics overrules, and the dancer is prohibited publicly or limited to twerk in private.

Bounce's social scene came from the Jazz and parade crowd's participation which manifested as call and response interactions between musicians and dancers challenging and improvising in response to the other (Taylor, 2018). This intense chemistry influences and fuels the tension of the music and dance (Taylor, 2018). For example, Bounce artists call out repetitive lyrics in their songs and the crowd responds verbally and/or physically through dance increasing momentum and vitality of the performance ending in a climatic resolution.

Social Media

Twerk, like many current social dance trends, received more collective recognition through the presence of social media. The rise in social media viewership since the late 2000s brought a unique cultural shift to how we can identify community (Duthley, 2017). Networked individualism like online communities started to gain traction and their users began to develop, share, and exchange content to an online audience of potentially millions of viewers. Through web applications like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok for example, users can create and showcase themselves and what's happening around them to a direct audience. This has been groundbreaking as it has given people autonomy on how they want

the world to view them. According to Regina Duthley (2017), social media also gives people the power to promote or reject information being shared from powerful media entities/bodies and with their own user-generated content. User-generated content is a way to “promote a democratizing form of cultural production for the masses” (p. 45).

Social media has become a space where women of color can freely express their sexuality and twerk can be an “embrace of Black feminist sexuality” (Duthley, 2017, p. 46). With the freedom of inclusivity and democratized participation, however, comes the potential risks of online safety. With the option of anonymity in these public spaces, people can directly criticize, harass, shame, and abuse content creators that publicly share their work (Gaunt, 2015). Social media also shows double standards of how society responds to Black women versus non-Black women expressing their sexuality (Gaunt, 2015).

Appropriation/Ratchet Culture

Since its rise in popularity in 2013, twerk’s presence in pop culture and feminist sectors of American society has been controversial and used as another way of policing Black sexuality. A crucial factor to note regarding twerk’s popularity and negative review is its origin in *ratchet culture*, a subset of Black culture popular in pop and social media (Love, 2017). The term *ratchet* is used to describe anything associated with the style, language, and cultural practices of poor people of color, specifically Black women of lower socio-economic classes (Love, 2017). Love (2017) describes ratchet as a term that emerged in popular media to describe Black people, again particularly Black women, as “loud, hot-tempered, and promiscuous” (p. 539). In terms of Black female stereotypes, she points out Lewis’s definition, “think of ratchet as a combination of Mammy, Sapphire, Jezebel, and the Welfare Queen—every controlling image of black women Patricia Hill Collins taught you about all rolled in to one” (Lewis, 2013, as cited in Love, 2017, p. 540). Many cultural critics and researchers have offered arguments of acceptance and rejection of the word but throughout these past two decades, the U.S. Deep South hip-

hop culture has taken pride in where they're from and see this "as a slogan to represent the complexities and fluidity of working-class Black life" (Love, 2017, p. 539).

The controversy of the twerking dialogue reflects how the broader system appropriates, exploits, and commodifies ratchet culture from its localized presence within Black communities to the mainstream culture. People who are not from these communities can *try on* the culture for their own amusement to look *cool* and/or to challenge the boundaries on what is acceptable. Often what happens here is that people will attempt to, and successfully, sport ratchet culture without holding their own accountability or understanding the historical and cultural education, background, or cultural framework of origin as it pertains to Black culture (Zink, 2017). In other words, White identifying celebrities, like Miley Cyrus, utilized mainly Black aesthetic social dance elements, including hip hop musical collaborations, integrated Black genres of music, and displayed public twerking, to further distance herself from her conservative squeaky-clean Disney child star image without understanding the appropriative nature of these cumulative actions (Zink, 2017). The level of privilege and entitlement to insight ownership of this historically Black social dance form manifested in Cyrus as later proclaiming, in 2014, the end of the twerk trend as "some people are living in the past" (ClevverNews, 2014, 0:38). She was also reported criticizing hip-hop when it no longer served her (Yang, 2019) shedding her Black culture associations unapologetically to advance in her career without much criticism (Zink, 2017). Before Cyrus, twerking had been a part of a "larger legacy of dance that plays a central role in adolescent socialization for many lower and middle-class black girls" (Guant, 2015, p. 255) that existed in person and online in an imagined community offering a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, the co-existence of Cyrus's twerking performance, and that of other White cis-gendered influencers and celebrities, created a new narrative to include and legitimize primarily non-Black people, tying twerk almost exclusively to its strip culture presence, and adding more adult connotations associated with the social dance form (Guant, 2015).

Elizabeth Pérez (2016) researched Black scholars, pop culture commentators, celebrities, and social media users who have spoken about White female artists who use twerk to sell themselves as *urban*. Through Black feminist theories, they emphasize “the historical pattern of white performers seizing on ‘forbidden’ elements of Black subcultures, simplifying them for mass consumption, and profiting from them, while mastery of these forms by African-Americans themselves are scorned, stigmatized, and forgotten” (p. 3). Pérez adds, “Black women are the originators, for their inventions – even if globally copied – are invariably adduced as evidence of pathology. The white version ‘goes viral’; the Black version remains a virus” (p. 3).

Feminist Perspectives

Through cultural, scientific, and political commentary and literature, twerk dance has been disparaged and viewed as an obscene, sexually promiscuous, ghetto, non-dance, and “embodying the very sins committed through enslavement, systemic oppression, and sexual exploitation: lust, sloth, and gluttony” (Pérez, 2016, p. 8). Historian Evelyn Hammonds (2017) observes that Black feminists are working to change the narrative of Black women in America by describing Black women’s sexuality as an absence. Metaphors include space, vision, or speechlessness, out of the presents reach, and capability (Hammonds, 2017). Findings highlight how feminists’ perspectives used to center twerk in advocating its bold presence of sexuality in Black women’s embodied sexual liberation.

Pérez (2016) makes her assertion that twerk should properly be included in the “family of Black Atlantic dances that emerged from shared histories of domination” (p. 8) and highlights that “bodies remember and flouting one estate’s rules might lead to rebellion against the institution of slavery itself” (p. 8). A common tactic to escape from hypersexual stereotypes is to appear less sexual but twerk’s unashamed appearance alters the passivity of Saartjie Baartman’s experience and creates a space where the butt is dominant, assertive, and invading. It challenges the traditional colonial perceptions of the Black body by invalidating sexual domination and empowering the dancer or mover.

According to Toth (2017), twerk is “more radical” than it seems (p. 300). Toth (2017) asserts twerk is a practice of letting go, celebrating the body, and exhibiting confidence and this radical pursuit can be applied not only to the media but to the self as well. What I have found in my research is that twerk has been regarded as an embodied decolonization tool that has taken the visual script of both its ancestry movement style and oppressor’s “violent phenomenon” (p. 299). Toth (2017) uses Frantz Fanon’s view of decolonization as a “violent phenomenon” (Fanon, 1968, as cited in Toth, 2017, p. 299) to place twerking as a “violent dance” creating a “violent aesthetic” (p. 299) of being sexually dominant and controlling. She also makes the connection to twerk being a “violent retaliation” (p. #) to the White-Black dichotomy wherein “Whites and Blacks thus represent two ends of a racial continuum, with one end populated by un-raced White individuals, and the other occupied by an intensely raced Black group” (p. 299).

In relation to Queer literature, Toth (2017) explains that twerk, as the Queer community regards it, is a “rejection of certainty, moving labels and replacing them by questions” (p. 292) and challenges stereotypes of acceptable dancing of large female backsides.

Lastly, Toth (2017) points out that the negative perception of twerking also comes from the emphasis of fat jiggling. Since the industrialization age, being fat or oversized has been stigmatized socially as underachievement, discomfort, and disgust. Twerk dance cares for none of these ideas as it highlights the pelvic region and replaces it in an assertive or sexual aesthetic. Unfortunately, the negative perception of fat in society is present in mainstream public twerk performance. Stereotyped Black beauty aesthetics discourages many dancers and limits public twerking displays to be performed by and accepted for *fit*, attractive bodies.

Duthley (2017) explores Black women’s twerking as a “(dis)respectability” tool of “black female sexual subjectivity” in the digital space (pp. 46-47). She urges the Black community to move towards a world accepting of Black women and embracing of their sexuality as “an assertion of humanity rather

than performance for the male gaze” (p. 47) or as a serving act for the consumption of any viewer’s pleasure. Black and Indigenous women, and largely all women of color, have used platforms like social media to openly express their sexuality. Twerk Team is an early example where women publicly share their talents and capitalize off their objectification disrupting the standard notions of online modesty and also distancing themselves from male centered control and ownership of their labor (Duthley, 2017). Despite the criticism of their aesthetic being seen as an obscene presentation, Duthley (2017) recognized “expressions that have been marked by Western society as obscene have a long history outside of the purview of Western standards” (p. 46).

Love (2017) brings further awareness to the superficial contradictory that is often times associated with binary of ratchet and respectable. The visually shocking, seemingly bawdy, and publicly assertive performance style of twerk is influenced by hip hop’s role in the fight for self-respect, identity, and resistance against oppression (Love, 2017). According to Love, New Orleans is a “site of performance, play, and pleasure, with Black bodies as the main attraction” (p. 543) and a vibrant culture of Black traditions and expression influenced by their creative resilience during the prohibition and segregation eras. In addition, displays of deliberate disruption in respectability politics are not uncommon in this public scene (Love, 2017). An example of this is the origin story of the Baby Doll in early 1900’s New Orleans Red Light District called Black Storyville (Love, 2017). They began as a group of women whose raunchy demeanor and intentional choice of baby-like clothing on their hypersexualized skin paraded down New Orleans streets calling out the irony of men paying for sex-work.

The conservative Christian community heavily regulated daily life social norms and music and dance acts as a platform for protest and expression amongst straight and queer Black people (Love, 2017). In New Orleans, Black youth, especially within the Queer youth population, turned to hip hop to cope with life within the city’s high levels of concentrated poverty. According to Love (2017), Black Queer youth brought in their “complicated lives of contradictions, agency, liberation, and undoing” (p.

544) into hip hop as a “wild and imaginative space that disrupts identities and gets ratchet through cultural modes of expression” (p. 544). Love advocated for the utilization of theories like Hip-Hop Feminism and the Black Ratchet Imagination to delve into twerk’s tension between the ratchet aesthetic and narratives and the grey areas of respectability. Hip-hop feminism looks into the deeper love-hate relationship of hip hop music and its culture and asks the problematic questions that both White and Black feminism dare not touch. This theory encourages critical pedagogy to expand beyond the binary in understanding the queerness of hip hop and Black youth in their desires toward the “performance of the failure to be respectable” (Love, 2017, p. 541). Its design aids in examining the imaginative, agentive, authentic, and messy lives of these individuals with the possibility of understanding its appeal to wider audiences.

Health

Black women’s sexual health and rights are disproportionately stigmatized, mistreated, and unaddressed (Black Survivors and Sexual Trauma, 2020; Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2018; Prather et al., 2018). Decades of mixed messaging and negative portrayals of Black female sexuality, culture, and life factors specifically have affected Black women with the increase of sexual violence incidences, the receipt of deficit-based sexual education shaming personal sex behaviors (Ware et al., 2019), being considered more mature starting in adolescence (The Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2019), and a lack of justice as sexual abuse victims (Barlow, 2020). Black women also have trouble navigating their own sexual health predicting poorer levels of self-esteem and self-worth, increased self-surveillance, poor body image, high anxiety, and poor mental health (Martins et al., 2020; Sanchez et al., 2017; Zink, 2016; Collie et al., 2017; Davis & Tucker-Brown, 2013; Mowatt et al., 2013).

Black women do not engage in higher risky sexual behavior than other racial groups (Baird & Walters, 2017; Ware et al., 2019) yet they are disproportionately at risk for sexual violence and discrimination. There is a high prevalence of violence against Black women, with difficulties in coping and seeking justice for sexual assault. Black women experience notably higher rates of psychological

abuse, sexual violence, and are at higher risk of being killed at the hands of a man (DuMonthier et al., 2017). The National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community reported in 2018,

- “30% of Black women with documented histories of childhood sexual abuse were sexually assaulted in adulthood”;
- “35% of Black women experienced some form of contact sexual violence during their lifetime”;
- “For every Black woman who reports rape, at least 15 do not report”;
- “40%-60% of Black women report being subjected to coercive sexual contact by age 18”;
- “1 in 4 Black girls will be sexually abused before the age of 18”;
- “1 in 5 Black women are survivors of rape”; and,
- “17% of Black women experienced sexual violence other than rape by an intimate partner during their lifetime.” (pp. 1-3)

The historical and contemporary sexual embodied experience of Black women can result in experiencing the effects of multigenerational trauma and engaging in a series of adaptive survival behaviors to cope with this marginalization. Dr. Joy DeGruy (2017) investigated and presented on this posttraumatic stress disorder variation within the African American community labeling the phenomenon as posttraumatic slave syndrome or PTSS (DeGruy, 2017). She cautions “multigenerational trauma together with continued oppression” with an “absence of opportunity to heal or access the benefits available in the society” leads to PTSS (p. 105). Black women’s multigenerational physical and mental harm from being racially hypersexualized without resources or a space to heal can result in these adaptive survival behavior patterns prevailing, some of which are extreme paranoia, low self-esteem, distorted self-concept, general self-destructive outlook, self-helplessness, depression, and hopelessness (DeGruy, 2017).

These statistics might not seem shocking to some members in the Black community as Black women are seen as the *caretakers* in their communities, protecting Black men from racial injustices the world inflicts and upholding the respectable and stable image of the Black community. Widespread cultural mistrust in the mental health profession (Whaley, 2001), mental health public and self-stigma (Bathje & Pryor, 2011), and intercultural considerations result in the low frequency Black Americans seeking mental health services. Exhibiting behaviors that serve as a self-protective function from discriminatory and racially based threats to self-esteem can lead to a misdiagnosis, like discriminatory influenced paranoia misdiagnosed as schizophrenia in African Americans (Whaley, 2001). Public and personal stigmas are also seen as major barriers as having a diagnosis and seeking help are looked down upon (Bathje & Pryor, 2011). Treatment from therapists can also be a barrier when they communicate a disbelief that uncontrollable discriminatory circumstances affect Black client's mental illness and insight for their treatment is solely based on their personal choices and actions (Ware et al., 2019). Intercultural context and intersection of identities also needs to be considered in understanding the Black women's experience of sexual assault. Intercultural considerations include the burden of upholding the strong Black woman stereotype, shortage of self-care examples, protecting the Black community by not reporting Black men, the Black church's influence (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2018), and fear of retaliation from perpetrator and community women (Decker et al., 2019), all of which prevents healing and reporting of Black female sexual abuse survivors. Improvement of help-seeking behaviors in African Americans can happen when public and self-stigmas are listened to and validated with the client, using person first language, being aware and challenging inaccurate stereotypes of mental health counseling, and being active in mental health awareness and advocacy campaigns (Bathje & Pryor, 2011).

If survivors do not seek help and/or treatment for the sexual assault trauma, short- and long-term emotional response to a horrific event like sexual assault can result, producing serious life-long consequences (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 1970). A large body of studies found that sexual

trauma is most often associated with “PTSD, depression, substance misuse, suicide ideation and attempts, and other adverse health effects” (Kessler et al., 2017) with evidence of more severe symptoms if the perpetrator is someone the survivor knows, which is common in sexual assault (Barlow, 2020; Black Survivors and Sexual Trauma, 2020). Consequences of sexual trauma in Black women are more intense because of the combined intersections of racism and sexism increasing depressive symptoms and post-traumatic stress (Bryant-Davis et al., 2020). When working with sexual trauma and Black women, it is recommended to utilize traditional trauma informed approaches with cultural sensitivity and modification (Tillman et al., 2010). It is important to acknowledge how the socio-political reality of sexual assault and the social climate relate to and intersect with socio-economic status, race, and gender in Black women’s sociohistorical context. Being informed in how greater social forces perpetuate assaults against Black women can help in relinquishing personal responsibility and burden from survivors (Tillman et al., 2010).

In working with sexual behavior and decision making, Ware, et al. (2019) found that sexual health interventions tend to center around a deficit-based approach focusing on Black women’s individual sexual behaviors and not their vulnerability or negative sexual outcomes like HIV. They recommend for sexual health interventions to have a more “holistic, asset-based” (p. 211) approach to sexual health disparities. Identifying Black women’s assets like their resilience and strong sense of community can be effective. In her work, Dowery (2020) airs caution that in a healing space it is important to be aware that Black women are stereotyped as being hyper-resilient, portraying the strong Black woman stereotype. This can be harmful as it can dismiss and invalidate their authentic emotions around their lived experiences (Dowery, 2020). Creating culturally sensitive spaces for peer support can encourage community in healing, insight, and a validation (Ware et al., 2019). Normalizing “sexual functioning, pleasure, or desire” (Ware et al., 2019, p. 211) can help counteract the myriad stigmas around Black women’s sexuality; encourage Black women’s investigation into their sexual development;

inspire further research in their sexual development through interviewing Black women, like in Appendix C; and, allow for more conversation addressing concerns around reproductive health, sexual decision making, and STI prevention education (Ware et al., 2019).

Dance Movement Therapy

Racial and sexual trauma for African Americans is an embodied experience as it is a cognitive one (DeGruy, 2017; Menakum, 2017) causing disconnection of the mind and body (Menakum, 2017). Utilizing the expressive performative arts of music and dance for mental health intervention can be beneficial to this population as these modes of expression have been used in African cultures for healing (Cantrick et al., 2018; Campbell, 2019). Dance/movement therapy (DMT) is a therapeutic approach that directly addresses embodied oppression as the field is uniquely equipped to investigate peoples lived embodied experience (Caldwell, 2013). DMT is a unique type of psychotherapy that inhabits its own set of cultural norms, preferences, and theories. The official definition according to the American Dance Association (ADTA), is “the psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive and physical integration of the individual” (ADTA, n.d., para. 1). DMT utilizes talk therapy but focuses on what's going on in the body as well as the mind (Levy, 1988). It is found that when people go through difficult circumstances, the body holds this memory which can be difficult to cope with (Menakum, 2017). As a result, the body develops unhealthy or maladaptive patterns to avoid the unbearable thoughts, memories, and emotions, almost literally avoiding or dissociating from these parts of our bodies experience (Menakum, 2017). Through bringing kinesthetic awareness of the body, from modalities like expressive movement and nonverbal communication, dance movement therapists (DMTs) work to somatically reclaim and renew this mind-body connection (Levy, 1988).

Because of this nontraditional psychotherapeutic career field's progressive and embodied dance approach, it has existed long after its creation without sufficient social critique. Now with the focus on social justice and cultural sensitivity in the mental health field, DMT has and continues to receive

critique and calls for professional, academic, and structural change (Cantrick et al., 2018; Chang, 2016; Kawano & Chang, 2019; Nichols, 2019; Schultz, 2018). In addressing issues around sexual health and the embodied experience of ethnic bodies, academic DMT literature that addresses sexual/sensual expression is limited.

Movement Influence and Bias

DMT is based in foundational theories and movement approaches from predominantly Western/European sources including Eurocentric psychology, dance forms of modern and ballet dance influences, Kestenberg Movement Profile (KMP), and Laban Movement Analysis (LMA; Nichols, 2019). In terms of movement, the pelvis is held still in European dance sensibilities like ballet and Pilates (Holmes, 2014). European/White racial markers of movement view stationary hips as elegant, while mobile hips are viewed as sexy, like in Latin dances (Boose, 2007). In terms of movement observation and application, early DMTs sought to establish integrated movement assessment systems in spite of movement ability and access to mental health services. DMT has historically centered diagnostic theories, such as KMP, Movement Psychodiagnostic Inventory (MPI), and LMA to analyze movement behaviors and to be applied for universal use as is. It was the belief that all movement is universal and, at the intrinsic level, all people exhibit functional and dysfunctional movement behavior the same (Caldwell, 2013). This also may be an effort to help DMT achieve clinical credibility and recognition by having a system or intervention that can be duplicated and studied in the competitive evidenced-based psychotherapy realm.

Like verbal language, people belong in and negotiate through movement communities (Caldwell, 2013, p. 183). Variation, power, and privilege exist in non-verbal language as it does in verbal language. Caldwell (2013) pointed out the ways movement observation and assessment can be biased and pathologize people based on how their body moves. While many tools are utilized and said to be rooted in primal human movement, they are not diverse as they are created by people of European descent

and its identified functional and dysfunctional movement patterns are based on European aesthetics (Caldwell, 2013).

A growing body of DMT research is focusing on Black women, presenting critical pedagogy, providing culturally sensitive recommendations, and utilizing culturally relevant discourse to implement interventions applicable to Black women's unique experiences (Campbell, 2019; Dowery, 2020; Hérard-Marshall & Rivera, 2019, Nichols, 2019; Whyte, & Barclay, 2019).

Sexuality

Author Audre Lorde (1989) views the erotic as an untapped source of power and information within women's lives that has been distorted and corrupted by a "racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society" (p. 91). The superficial erotic is what is prevalent in society, encouraged as a sign of female inferiority it emphasizes sensation with true feeling, and has a single function of service to men. Lorde argues the erotic has been long miscalled by men and used against women; is seen as confusing, trivial, psychotic; and, as a result is left unexplored. She urges women to explore the erotic and feel the internal sense of satisfaction as it encourages fullness in the depth of feeling, honoring and respecting the and self-power, without harm to the other.

As the nature of this somatic field involves the body's movement and connection with others, unfortunately there is a systematic avoidance to bring awareness to the PHB in DMT academic programs out of concern of students re-traumatizing clients or therapists with sexual trauma history. Researcher Sissy Lykou (2018) explored in-depth, the absence of sexuality in the DMT's mind-body continuum. A DMT investigation has yet to happen in the observance of sexuality as a body language and its connection to the mind-body processing in children and adults. Lack of exploration and understanding further aids in causing disturbances and incongruence in the relationship between therapist and client when sexuality is brought up, as does the undeniable connection of power and sexuality, and feelings of

shame and anxiety DMT trainees have leading to disempowerment of clinicians when exploring sexuality (Lykou, 2018).

Without the exploration of embodied sexuality, there is a risk for bias and a generalization of hypersexuality. In 2019, at ADTA's national conference, Whyte and Barclay (2019), two Black DMTs and researchers, gave a presentation on the unaddressed hypersexual movement perceptions in the mental health field, specifically in DMT. They found hypersexuality to be "a projection of stored body memories relating to traumatic physical and/or sexual experiences, expressed in movement combinations and patterns that exhibit uncontrollable sexual desires, thoughts and feelings, and are obsessive and compulsive in nature" (Whyte & Barclay, 2019, para. 4).

The appearance and intentionality of African diasporic movement has been mistaken for hypersexual movement because of its focus in the pelvic region where traumatic sexual assaults occur. This, along with associations of sexually promiscuity and acting out behavior, makes twerking susceptible to hypersexual assessment. Twerking and other African dance movements (ADM) are similar to hypersexual movement in their emphasized body parts but has noted differences as highlighted by Whyte and Barclay (2019). ADM has meaning, structure, and rhythm in the movement. ADM is "done with awareness and intention rather than the emergence of unconscious trauma material stored in the body" (para. 9) allowing the movement to offer a sense of power and freedom rather than a sense of powerlessness in hypersexual movement (para. 9).

Generalizing African movement patterns and non-White clients as hypersexual, pathologizes movement behaviors of entire cultures. Understanding and embodying African diasporic movement will not only expand the movement vocabulary and address cultural observation bias, but as Whyte and Barclay (2019) addressed in their presentation, it "will help to mitigate the misdiagnosis of hypersexuality and the assumption that a non-white client has suffered sexual trauma when they are simply expressing themselves in the backdrop of their cultural nuances" (para. 10).

Sexual trauma. DMTs work extensively with populations suffering sexual trauma and people wanting to improve overall sense of well-being that include sexuality. DMT can aid in rebuilding connections of the mind and body that was severed as result of sexual abuse (Ho, 2015). It is clinically recognized as an effective intervention for childhood sexual abuse survivors (Ho, 2015). It uses its creative process and knowledge of the body's reaction to trauma to encourage self-awareness, create a sense of freedom and security, support mind/body re-integration, access unconscious and embodied materials, and rebuild of intra- and inter-personal relationships (Ho, 2015).

In her discussion of DMT and sexuality, researcher Cantrick (2019) offers three approaches to therapy which further the integration of social justice counseling: (a) trauma-informed—"oppression is a chronic stressor in the client's daily life which contributes to their ongoing experience of trauma," (b) client defined/centered—"clinician orients to the client with the belief that the client is inherently whole and basically good," and (c) strengths-based—"clinical work reminds clients of their resiliency and the skills inherent in their survival strategies" (p. 10).

DMT and Afro-Diasporic Intervention

DMTs of color are working to identify elements of empowerment to heal intergenerational trauma in the non-Western dance vernaculars. Researchers and DMTs Herard-Marshall and Rivera (2019) discuss the natural phenomenon of embodied resilience in the community and its potential DMT application in healing trauma. Their recommendations of Afro-Caribbean movement elements for clinical intervention include self-body power, collective power, sociopolitical power, and spiritual power. Like their Afro-Caribbean relatives, New Orleans' Black people harbor Afro-Caribbean's movement sensibilities utilizing it as a dance of resilience. Twerk comes from a strong line of bold dancing that calls for independence, resilience, and protest.

Even though New Orleans' Black youth suffer through harsh life conditions, there is still cause for celebration (Love, 2017). Celebration in life and death (second-line funerals) is a common cultural

exercise in New Orleans, one that fuels what Herard-Marshall and Rivera (2019) distinguish as self-body, collective, socio-political, and spiritual power. Communal gatherings, especially second lines, are where performative displays of collective expression, unique improvisation of solo voices, celebrating the life of the dead (twerking is seen in the repast), and finally New Orleanians religious, spiritual, ancestral inspirational presence exist in music and dance expressions (Hérard-Marshall & Rivera, 2019). Shown in Appendix D, this framework that Herard-Marshall and Rivera (2019) laid out is brimming with empowerment of the body-mind-spirit.

Accessing PHB and Shaking

In researching benefits of PHB and shaking movement for healing I have identified scientific and cultural accounts that address traumatic stress and sexual trauma. Many findings attributed the role of trauma retention to the vagus nerve (Berceli, 2019; Caffrey, 2020; Menakem, 2017). The vagus nerve is the largest, complex, sensitive organ in the automatic nervous system (ANS) which unites and communicates with the entire nervous system network in the human body (Menakum, 2017). It is significant in its functions of providing nerve functioning to multiple organs, handling both sensory and motor information, and receiving and distributing flight, fight, freeze responses to the rest of the body. The vagus nerve is commonly referred to as the *soul nerve* as it is seen as the organ that makes us human. It allows us to experience somatic, emotional reactions like the stomach clenching sensation when we feel anxious or scared, and feelings like compassion, empathy, love, and despair. These feelings and emotions can happen without being rationalized through the brain as the vagus nerve only connects to the brain stem. This means that the vagus nerve can command muscles to contract, release, move, constrict, and relax, outside of our conscious control and awareness (Menakum, 2017). This disconnection can pose a risk of the body misinterpreting a safe situation as unsafe.

A medical hypothesis was coined in the development of the polyvagal theory that suggests instead of the sympathetic and parasympathetic portions of the ANS being understood as balanced and

equal, their functioning, in fact, operate from a “hierarchy of inbuilt responses that have evolved over time” (Caffrey, 2020, p. 3). In addition to the response pathways of immobilizing freeze response, flight response, and the mobilizing fight response, the Polyvagal theory includes the pathway of social engagement that “responds to cues of comfort and safety [and] allows people to feel connected and engaged” (p. 3). Drawing from evolutionary biology and neurology, social cues like bodily movement, tones of voice, and facial expressions can have an impact the body’s physical response (Caffrey, 2020). If not addressed, this impact of socialization can produce similar lasting traumatic effects on the body’s defense mechanisms.

Menakum (2017) discusses body-connected methods of healing trauma in leaning into the discomfort, conflict, and uncertainty. He recommends processing pain through your integrity in clean productive pain, which includes behaviors resulting in growth, relief, and homeostasis, versus processing your fear in dirty harmful pain, which includes behaviors resulting in avoidance, and denial. Out of his five anchors, described in Appendix E, Menakum presents the final often over-looked anchor of safely discharging energy that remains. After allowing the body to experience its natural defensive and protective urges, he recommends discharging excess energy through activities like dance and physical labor, and letting the body do whatever it does like the urge to run, shout, and shake.

Shaking is something we are able to do voluntarily or involuntarily and can act as a coping mechanism. A growing body of research is encouraging body shaking, trembling, or vibrating the body as a natural way the body can achieve normal homeostasis from a stressful and/or traumatic event (Berceli, 2010). When the body feels threatened, it releases stress hormones to surmount the danger in its muscles and connective tissues. This allows us to react to the danger via fight, flight, and freeze responses by activating the hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. HPA is a neurological mechanism that serves as a neuro-biological defense aroused at the time of threat to one’s physical-self or social-self that regulates energy storage, ability to release, and stress (Berceli, 2010). Once the body is able to

return to parasympathetic functioning, a calmer state, these vibrations act as an autonomic, neural deactivation of the HPA axis and helps to ease the reaction and transition back to homeostasis (Berceli, 2010). This shaking to disperse stress is more prominently seen in animals, like dogs, zebras, and impalas, and there is literature on how some animals use shakes to avoid posttraumatic stress disorder (Levine & Frederick, 1997; Sapolsky, 2004). Unfortunately, humans in Western cultures are societally conditioned to suppress this reaction, viewing it as a sign of fragility and helplessness. Because this suppression is unnatural, humans adopt this stress into our bodies ultimately causing our physical tension and emotional/mental suffering like overactive stress response and depression (Lee & Hicken, 2016). Black people can experience a high activation rate of the HPA axis in persistently anticipating or preparing for racial discrimination (Shaw et al., 2018). While this is a healthy component of our stress biology, chronic use can result in dysfunction (i.e., hypervigilance) and weakening mental (depressive symptoms) and physical health (Lee & Hicken, 2016).

Despite the disconnection, there have been efforts to reintroduce shaking back into the body's repertoire as a coping mechanism and stress relief tool. I have observed this release method of shaking out muscles after or in transitions in highly intense strength and conditioning exercises in dance or exercise class. Dr. Berceli (2010), a trauma intervention expert, has a recent growing body of research and application on this shaking behavior he calls the "neurogenic tremors" (p. 6). In the floor exercise portion of his Tension and Trauma Releasing Exercises (TRE), he directly activates the tremor in the PHB by elevating and holding the pelvis in the bridge position. His exercise takes a more passive role of the body as it allows the uncontrollable shakes to course through the body (Berceli, 2019). A more voluntary active role of body shaking can be seen in Qigong shaking practices, I have observed in this practice where the intentional shake is guided throughout every part of the body except the pelvic region (Eng, 2012).

While more studies need to be done, sexual abuse survivors have utilized dancing of their PHB for healing and learning to access difficult movement patterns in the body in belly dance (Eish-Baltaoglu, 2020; Moe, 2014) and twerk (Everett, 2019; Wicker, 2018). For example, BBC News reported on the experience of rape survivors Kemi and Mojo, two women of color, who attend a plus-size Curve Catwalk dance class looking to reclaim their sexuality that was taken from them by their perpetrators (citation). They learned safe self-touch and body acceptance in a validating space where they could process and embody their body confidence and healing journeys.

Discussion

This literature review investigated the historical, embodied, and hyperlocal cultural landscapes of twerking as a controversial phenomenon that challenges the accepted sociocultural norms of the United States. Much of its criticism is from the significant impact of Western European influence in the construction and stigmatization of Black female sexuality (Duthley, 2016; Toth, 2017). This includes the historical attempts of White-colonial patriarchal sexual control, tying Black women to their sexuality, and policing their sexual expression. Black women have suffered disproportionality in racial and sexual violence regardless of how they sexually present in society (Black Survivors and Sexual Trauma, 2020; Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2018; Prather et al., 2018).

I have concluded from my research that twerk has been regarded as an embodied decolonization tool that has taken the visual script of both its ancestry movement style and oppressors “violent phenomenon” (Fanon, 1968 as cited in Toth, 2017, p. 299). Its bold presentation challenges respectability politics and stereotypes of how women should behave. It can give agency to Black women who choose to boldly be sexual or simply embrace their natural-but-societally tabooed African movement sensibilities. As a DMT student and New Orleans local, this investigation has deepened my understanding of my own movement cultural language. It also highlights the importance of research being done or overseen by natives of the culture as the context of twerk dance is messy, contradictory,

and routinely misinterpreted by outside researchers. Overlooking societally *unacceptable* dance from working- and lower- class communities can ignore the harsh lived realities and complex lives of its originators. Failure to recognize how colonization has affected Black women, especially in its day-to-day forms, and how colonial dynamics of oppression is present in our institutions and ideologies, results in stagnant growth and continual patterns of harm inflicted on Black women.

Studying DMT for 3 years, I can see the potential for DMTs doing impactful work with Black women in addressing issues associated with their sexuality and reconnection with their identities. The DMT field however has further work to do to address its cultural bias that are prevalent. An additional investigation into the topic of sexual/sensual expression to not perpetuate oversexualizing tropes and assessment onto Black women is needed. This investigation can include recognizing clinician's own discomfort around perceived sexual movement or embodying sexual movement; recognizing the urge to attribute dysfunctional labels on patterns of movement; and, investigating from a culturally affirming and strengths-based approach that is inclusive of the historical, social, cultural, and medical impact on the individualized human movement patterns. New research into tension releasing interventions that engage and identify what has already existed in cultures is important as well.

Twerking is a dance of the unapologetic energetic release and relaxation of the pelvic floor. Its release of muscles and flesh is voluntary and can give the dancer agency in the movement. Its inclusion, play, and celebratory movement can be an empowering experience for the client. At the discretion of timing from the experienced DMT professional, twerk, or the utilization of pelvic release, can be an empowering or reclaiming intervention for the client. Limitations and calls for further deeper investigation include Black female, male, and queer sexuality in the presence of social media, child to adulthood development, embodied racial socialization, and movement behaviors.

Conclusion

Black people have been hyper visible during the recent Black Lives Matter movement as justice is being argued as dependent on how respectable they are or were in their life before. Black women who are overt in their sexual expression have been victim-blamed due to such expression. Recognizing the cultural climate and how Black women have navigated through will inform the creation of therapeutic spaces and utilizing strengths-based, asset-based, and holistic approaches will help create the safe atmosphere needed for addressing these topics in individual or group sessions with Black women. It is also important to recognize that negative tropes can be not only socially accepted but are often internalized and reinforced within the Black community. It is important for the clinician in working with Black or other communities of color to be aware of their own identity and social location and to work towards knowing when to step into communal conversations around sexual respectability politics and when to hold back to build more trust and understanding.

Coming into this field I was fortunate enough to be in community with DMTs of color, namely Black, Indigenous and Afro-Latinx women, who have been instrumental in evolving the fields cultural reach. Literature and discourse around African diasporic dance and movement have been happening and, as an incoming DMT, I hope my contribution to this conversation will further propel DMT in the direction of equity and inclusion. To close, I will leave readers with these famous and timely words of New Orleans' own queer artist Big Freedia (2014),

Release ya anger. Release ya mind. Release ya job. Release the time. Release ya trade. Release
the stress. Release the love. Forget the rest. Let's Go.

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Appendix A

Black Female Stereotypes

- **Mammy** is an unattractive, asexual Black mother who is strong, passive, and content in her caretaking role (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016).
- **Jezebel** is seen as a sexually available, promiscuous, and immoral Black woman (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016).
- **Sapphire** is seen as an emasculating, aggressive, controlling, and angry Black woman (Rosenthal & Lobel, 2016).
- **Welfare Queen** is a poor, uneducated, single Black woman who lives off of her children's public assistance instead of working (Nadasen, 2007).
- **Ratchet** woman is a combination of all of these stereotypes into one (Love, 2017).

Appendix B

Twerk Influences and Parallels

African American – Historical (Gaunt, 2015; Pérez, 2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black Bottom Dance • Bump-and-Grind including the Slow Drag • Bump and the Four Corners - Both Danced to 1970s Soul and Funk • Doing the Butt in the Early '90s • Tootsie Roll and P[ussy]-Popping • Joséphine Baker's frenzied improvisational Stomach Dance • the Shake, the Shimmy, the Mess Around By New York Black Jazz Dancers in 1920s • Georgia: Crawl, Ballin' the Jack • Florida: Swamp Shimmy • Sinuous Snake Hip and Fish Tail Dances on Plantations
African American – Contemporary (Hanna 2013; Pérez, 2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Orleans, Miami, Atlanta, and Houston - Strippers have influenced athleticism, musical phrasing, and floor craft in Twerking • Chicago: Juking, Juken and Slow Juke • Bay Area: Yiking • Tampa: Jukin' • Dallas: Jigging • Miami and Atlanta: Booty Bass-Based Freaking and Throwing That/The Dick, Snaking, the Chicken Head • Popping Cakes [Butt Cheeks], used by those affiliated with the Crips Street Gang on the West Coast, becomes Popping Bakes when spoken by a Bloods Member
Caribbean (Gaunt, 2015; Pérez 2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jamaican Reggae and Dancehall • Jamaica, Trinidad, and Barbados: Limin', Bite Back, Wainin', Whinin', Winin', and Wukkin' Up
Latin America (Gaunt, 2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Panamanian and Puerto Rican Styles of Reggaeton, Perreo • South American youth's Dembow
Africa (Gaunt, 2015; Pérez 2016; Taylor 2018; Zink 2016)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Côte d'Ivoire: Mapouka • Senegal: Sabar and Ventilateur, Leumbeul • Cameroon: Makossa and Makassi, Zingué • Angola: Kuduro • Somalia: Niiko • Democratic Republic of Congo: Kwassa Kwassa • Afro-Arab Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates: Malaya • Tanzania and Kenya Swahili people's Chakacha • Ghana: Azonto • Uganda: Sitya Loss Dance

Appendix C

Phases of Sexual Black Female Development

Adapted from Crooks et al. (2019)

- **Girl (ages 5-14) phase-** where participants experience “early sexual development and a lack of sexual knowledge” (p. 19), while family friends and society view and treat them as sexually more mature than non-Black girls their age
- **Grown (ages 11-18) phase-** participants were seen as more adult in behavior or appearance than being a girl and were exploring sexual activity; a transitional phase where the development of their sexual and personal identities is “influenced by peer relationships, social environments, communities and black culture” (p. 20)
- **Woman (when Black females became parents or ages 18+) phase-** identified with the adversities associated with being Black and female, and redefining the self-image of Black woman (p. 21)

Appendix D

Four Afro-Caribbean Movement Levels of Empowerment

Adapted from Hérard-Marshall and Rivera's (2019) "levels of empowerment found in the Afro-Caribbean movement vernacular, which can help inform DMT's clinical interventions" (para. 4)

Power	Activated by. . .	Afro-Caribbean dance aesthetics
Self-Body	symbolic imagery and intentionally dancing "to activate healing energy, intuition, and internal resources" (para. 5)	"power postures, resistance, liberation gestures, fall and recovery patterns" (para. 5)
Collective	"communal dance spaces [which] provide a container and a safe holding environment for collective expression" (para. 7)	"circle formation, call and response. . . , polyrhythmic structures found in Afro-Caribbean song, music and dance" (para. 7)
Socio-Political	"including the stories of oppression into our treatment approaches and understanding how social and political systems influence our clients' life" (para. 8)	dance traditions with their "metaphors and narratives" (para. 8)
Spiritual	accessing the energy and cultivating connections "between health and spiritual alignment by claiming spirit as an internal resource" (para. 9)	"Afro-Caribbean music, song, and dance . . . as a vehicle to pray and receive dance as a spiritual blessing" (para. 9)

Appendix E

Five Anchors of Processing Clean Pain

... is a body-focused process you determine “when you sense conflict building; when that conflict looks and feels as if it will continue to escalate; and when you feel a growing discomfort in your soul nerve” (Menakum, 2017, p. #).

- **Anchor 1:** Soothe yourself to quiet your mind, calm your heart, and settle your body...
- **Anchor 2:** Simply notice the sensations, vibrations, and emotions in your body instead of reacting to them...
- **Anchor 3:** Accept the discomfort- and notice when it changes- instead of trying to flee from it...
- **Anchor 4:** Stay present and in your body as you move through the unfolding experience, with all its ambiguity and uncertainty, and respond from the best parts of yourself...
- **Anchor 5:** Safely discharge any energy that remains.” (p. 168)

THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: Donna C. Owens