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conference
Advisor: Heather Samuelson

Tracing Roots: Finding Cultural Identity Through the African Diaspora

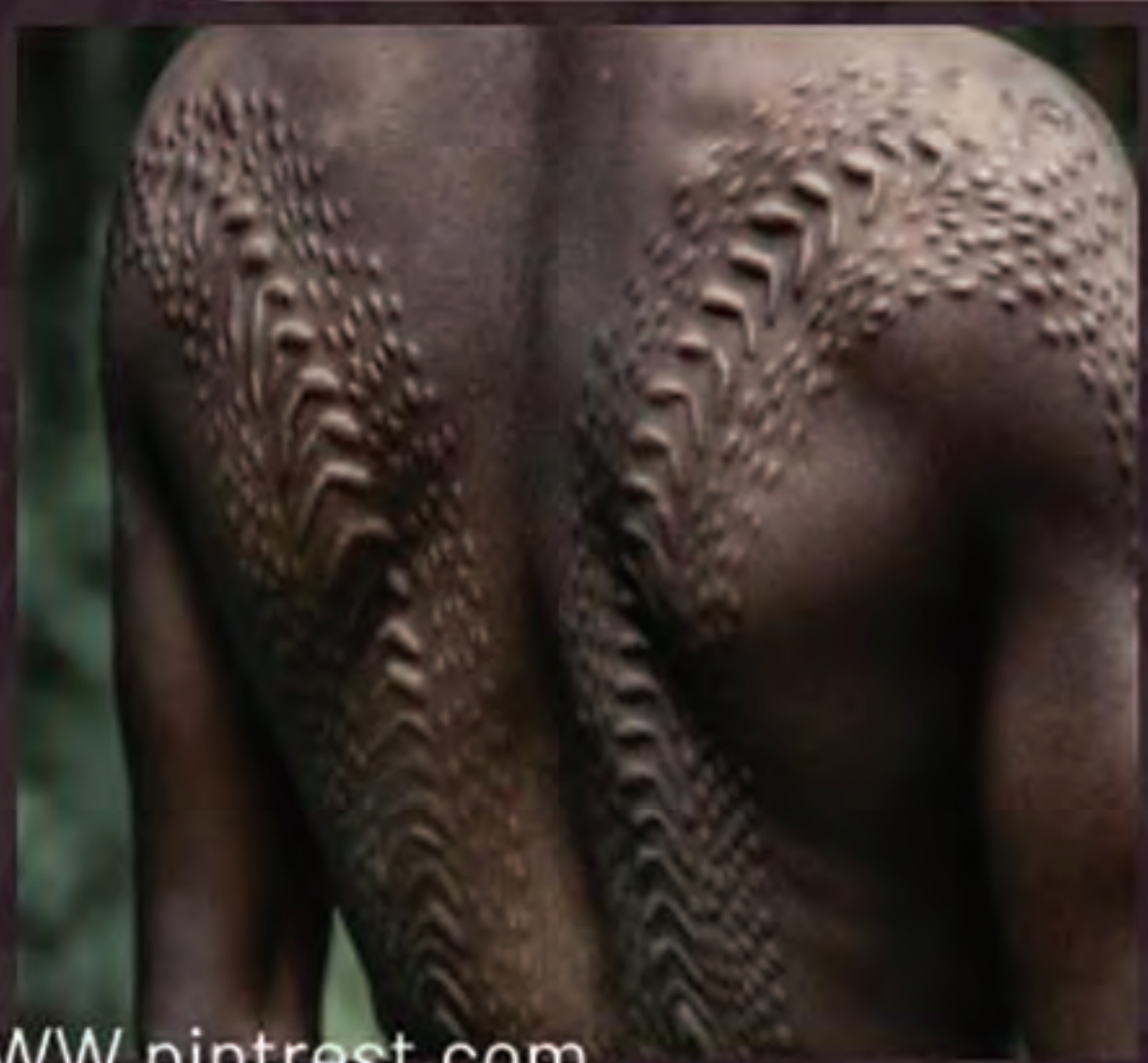
Joy Crissmon

Stephen F. Austin State University



BACKGROUND

My entire life I've always wanted to know where my family originated from. I was surrounded by others with a strong knowledge of their cultural background and lineage, I longed for that same information. The purpose of my project was to trace back the lineage of my family and explore the culture of my roots. However, through research I found that this was an incredibly difficult and complex task for many African decent peoples. I found that the disconnection of roots is a shared experience by many, due to the effects of the African Diaspora. As a result, generations of people are unable to connect to their original cultural heritage, leaving many with a gap in their cultural identities. Out of this research I created an adaptation piece, that explores the European identities placed on those of African descent and the struggles of attempting to break away from the Eurocentric ideologies and get back to the roots of one's heritage. Thus, my research has inspired me to find who I am, where I came from, and how I am perceived as an African American female in European dance forms.



Jason Vance



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What is the African diaspora: The African Diaspora is “a term commonly used to describe the mass dispersion of peoples from Africa during the Transatlantic Slave Trades, from the 1500s to the 1800s. This took millions of people from Western and Central Africa to different regions throughout the Americas and the Caribbean (old ways).”



JASON VANCE

RESEARCH

While I could only trace my lineage back to the late 1800s, I found that I have ancestors of Jamaican descent. I have used this information in conjunction with my dance training, in ballet, to craft choreography that depicts the struggles of African Americans in European dance forms, fighting to find their identities. I was drawn to research that describes a Christmas festival, Jonkonnu, which is a one of the oldest dance forms in Jamaica. Jonkonnu is described as a “masking tradition, much like that of Carnival or Mardi Gras (Okpewho, pg.254).” Upon digging deeper into the concept of identities I have found that “...self- doubt that arose among African peoples led them to lose that simple human pride that normally prevented people from readily accepting the notion that they and their cultures were inferior to others. Generations of African Peoples experienced the onus of seeing themselves through the eyes of others. As ‘bastards’ of the west, they always sensed that in many subtle and obvious ways they were illegitimate (*he African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*, Pg.29).” This relates to many African Americans who are unfamiliar with their roots, when cultural knowledge is unknown, it's natural to accept the identity that is given by society. This feeling of illegitimacy stems from the European colonial era desire to “remake the world in its image... (Okpewho,30).” The mutual feeling of displacement causes many diasporic people to attempt to trace back their lineage and regain their cultural identities. Thus my research has inspired me to find who I am, where I came from, and how I am perceived as an African American female in European dance forms.

CONCLUSION

A transformative concept ties into the ending of my piece. While it is nearly impossible to trace my lineage and learn the origins of my identity, I realized there is so much beauty in the culture I've been raised in. I've felt disconnected to a “wakand-ian” culture that I only could have ever dreamt of. However, the beauty, unity, and knowledge within the culture among Blacks and African Americans is the Wakanda I've been searching for my whole life. Conclusively, my cultural identity is knitted within the history and achievements of strong Black people in America. Through this journey, I've found “new life” and strength in recognizing the cultural connections that's been thriving right before my eyes.

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