

Dance My Pain Away

PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC, THE DANCE FLOOR WAS ONE OF my playgrounds. Whether dancing outside under the stars or inside under a constellation of club lights. The dance floor was a site of communion and community, improvisational chants of ayyyyyeee(men) accompanying my rhythmic ritual. Skin adorned with the sheen of sweat, a libation to the dance gods. The deejays might as well have been on the organ or had a tambourine in hand, the way they conjured my worship.

A few weeks before the global shutdown, I experienced my last real night out. I attended a Black song tribute event followed by an impromptu after-party at a nearby lounge. I'll sweat out my makeup and (impractical) outfits for the right deejay. That night ended with my peach satin mini-dress stuck to my curves. For me, cute does not take precedent over groove on the dance floor. The stank face, the screw face, a testament that you feel it deep in your bones and are now dancing, dancing.

Two months prior to that night, it was a friend's wedding reception played by an international deejay who earned his rate and our respect. It was my partner's first time seeing me dance in public. I tossed my black, canary-colored, fringed, large peacock-embroidered dress all over the floor. More satin. More sweat. More joy.

Halfway through the first year of the pandemic what was supposed to be an epic gathering for Juneteenth ended with my brief appearance to read an affirmation: *Shine like there is a prayer in the mouths of your ancestors with your name on it.* I stood beside the makeshift deejay booth on the second-floor deck. The deejay was known for blessing people with the music they wanted played. If you've ever stalked a deejay booth trying to get some love for your requested song, you know this isn't insignificant. Sadly, I left without dancing as the rain baptized my people below. It wasn't the weather that deterred me. I've danced under a wet sky before, one time with my kid beside me and Cardi B onstage, but this pandemic remains a different type of storm.

I used to have full-bodied fun. Random nights of joy after running into at least one friend looking to leave their woes on the dance

floor. Long days of work and worry transmuted into energy and expressed through rhythm. The drums drowned out the drama as we danced our pain away. There have been times when the spot is so small, the dance floor is wherever you're located. Sometimes, there is an abundance of space and we're kicking up grass and dust at the cookout, hands lifted to the heavens, a spontaneous choir whenever one of our favorite songs came on: *...before I let you goooooooooo...* Now, I hear a new song and fantasize about synchronizing my steps to the two and four over the loud music. It's been over two years and I no longer feel fully like myself. A major part of my movement rituals and social connection missing. Is it gone forever?

I do not know when I fell in love with dancing. Perhaps it was watching my parents, who were enthusiastic dancers even if they lacked rhythm, from the time I was small. I can see my mom snapping her finger, her hip tooted up, *jute jute*. Not in sync, but happy. My dad doing the running man, all arms and chest—*ahh ahh*. Not on beat, but hype. I love these types of dancers: folks that can still find joy even if it doesn't look correct or proper. I love first-on-the-floor dancers. I love *ooooooooh, that's my song* dancers. I love *watch out now* dancers. I love *you not finna out-dance me* dancers—even if they won't admit it.

Dancing asks me to connect with my body, to gather my fragmented selves and prepare them for magic and movement. It asks me to be present. To be in sync with all that I am feeling and all that I am. On the dance floor, the roar of music and bodies in motion sends healing vibrations through my body, breaking up all that has become stagnant. I am my freest self on the dance floor, the rhythm dragging respectability under my feet—the rhythm reminding me of just how alive I am.

Dance summons the truth: what my body feels, what my body can do, what my body remembers, what my body wants. I can feel every joint, every muscle. Getting low like it's hot but rising like it's lukewarm. These ain't Meg Thee Stallion knees, but they work. They turn my two-step into steps that can't be traced, code that can't be deciphered outside of my dancing kinfolk. Even dancing solo in a room full of people is its own type of intimacy. When your eyes meet a stranger's hitting the same move. I. See. You. *Ayyyyyyeee* as affirmation.

My people breathed in unison to the smack and sway in the belly of the ship. The drums traveled in them, their bodies not their

own—their bodies *all* that they owned. Violence stole the drums and desecrated dance. How do you take your insides and give them shape? How do you make all the parts of you work together in harmony?

Our dance is a textured testimony of kinesthetic genius that is out of step with basic stereotypes like *all Black people have rhythm*, because it's the joy, desire, and pleasure for me. The music speaks to us and we talk back with our bodies. We talk back with our hearts. We talk back with our sorrow. We talk back with our joy. Our bodies, vessels of worship, moving like there is a mighty song in the mouths of our ancestors with our names in it. A song summoning me back to the dance floor.

I'm ready.