

Movement as Cultural Memory:
Investigating the Preservation and Adaptation of Afro-Cuban Dance in the U.S. Diaspora

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Abstract

This paper examines how Afro-Cuban dance is preserved and adapted as embodied cultural memory in the United States. Drawing on scholarly research and participant observation conducted in New York City and Miami during summer 2026, I compare how instructors transmit movement alongside rhythm, history, spirituality, symbolism, and communal participation. New York situated Afro-Cuban movement within a broader network of African diasporic traditions, while Miami instruction more explicitly connected Cuban folkloric movement to specific histories and social practices. I argue that adaptation does not necessarily constitute cultural loss: traditions can transform while retaining cultural meaning when movement remains connected to its historical and communal foundations.

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Draft & Under Review

Rather than a singular, monolithic genre, Afro-Cuban dance comprises a vibrant constellation of sacred and secular practices forged across distinct African-derived religious and cultural lineage traditions.¹ Its meanings extend far beyond physical movement; Afro-Cuban rituals and celebrations integrate gesture, sound, language, music, and dance into what scholar Miguel Arnedo conceptualizes as “orchestrations of media.”²

As Afro-Cuban traditions migrate across geographical borders, they demonstrate remarkable adaptability while preserving their core cultural foundations.³ Marta Moreno Vega explains that their transformations throughout the African diaspora have expanded their meanings while central spiritual principles have remained constant.⁴ However, when movement is separated from its religious, historical, and communal contexts, a living cultural practice risks being reduced to an “exotic fragment” or turned into a de-sacralized form of public expression.⁵

This study investigates how Afro-Cuban dance is both sustained and adapted within instructional spaces across the United States. Drawing on scholarly literature alongside ethnographic participant observation in New York City and Miami during the summer of 2026, I analyze how instructors navigate movement transmission within two distinct diasporic centers. I contend that Afro-Cuban dance serves as an engine of embodied cultural memory precisely when educators transmit physical steps in tandem with rhythm, history, spirituality, symbolism, and communal relationships. When those connections are severed, adaptation devolves into mere decontextualization.

¹ Lourdes Martínez-Echazábal, “The Politics of Afro-Cuban Religion in Contemporary Cuban Cinema,” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 13, no. 1 (1994): 16, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42656432>.

² Miguel Arnedo, “‘Afrocubanista’ Poetry and Afro-Cuban Performance,” *The Modern Language Review* 96, no. 4 (2001): 994, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3735865>.

³ Carrie Viarnes, “Cultural Memory in Afro-Cuban Possession: Problematizing Spiritual Categories, Resurfacing ‘Other’ Histories,” *Western Folklore* 66, nos. 1–2 (2007): 131, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25474848>.

⁴ Marta Moreno Vega, “The Ancestral Sacred Creative Impulse of Africa and the African Diaspora: Ase, the Nexus of the Black Global Aesthetic,” *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 5 (1999): 45.

⁵ Martínez-Echazábal, “Politics of Afro-Cuban Religion,” 19.

Historical Context

Afro-Cuban dance emerged within the brutal matrix of Spanish colonial slavery and the forced transatlantic displacement of Africans to Cuba.⁶ The cultural practices that formed its historical foundations were reconstructed by Africans held in captivity in Cuba.⁷ Within Black religious communities, practitioners safeguarded sacred dances, songs, spiritual beliefs, vocabulary, oral traditions, and instruments used in ritual life.⁸ Sonia Martínez-Echazábal describes the Yoruba tradition as surviving both the “transatlantic journey” and the physical displacement from its original territory.⁹ By rebuilding these practices under hostile colonial circumstances, African communities preserved important cultural foundations while adapting them to a new Caribbean reality.

Over time, these reconstructed traditions intersected with other African-derived practices alongside European cultural forms of Spanish origin.¹⁰ Afro-Cuban dance consequently developed through simultaneous processes of continuity, adaptation, and cultural exchange.

African Diaspora and Transculturation in Cuba

Afro-Cuban culture coalesced through the forced migration and convergence of diverse African ethnic groups in colonial Cuba. Fernando Nodal identifies several distinct African populations—including Yoruba, Carabalí, Mandinga, and others—whose drums were reverberated through colonial *cabildos*, plantation communities, and feast-day dances.¹¹

Among these diverse influences, Yoruba-derived traditions proved especially enduring

⁶ Roberto Nodal, “The Social Evolution of the Afro-Cuban Drum,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 11, no. 2 (1983): 157, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1214911>; Marta Moreno Vega, “The Ancestral Sacred Creative Impulse of Africa and the African Diaspora: Ase, the Nexus of the Black Global Aesthetic,” *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 5 (1999): 46–48.

⁷Nodal, “Social Evolution of the Afro-Cuban Drum,” 157.

⁸ Nodal, “Social Evolution of the Afro-Cuban Drum,” 157.

⁹Martínez-Echazábal, “Politics of Afro-Cuban Religion,” 16.

¹⁰ Nodal, “Social Evolution of the Afro-Cuban Drum,” 157.

¹¹ Nodal, “Social Evolution of the Afro-Cuban Drum,” 157.

within Afro-Cuban religious and performance culture. In Cuba, Yoruba people and their language were traditionally known as *Lucumí*.¹² Scholars Peter Manuel and Orlando Fiol further distinguish the Iyesá, descendants of the Ijesha Yoruba, from the Arará, whose ancestors came from the West African kingdoms of Allada, Ouidah, and Dahomey.¹³ Central African traditions also shaped Afro-Cuban culture; Manuel and Fiol identify a particularly influential cultural strand derived from Bantu peoples of the west-central Congo River region.¹⁴

Although the Iyesá and Arará retained distinct rhythm, drums, and songs separate from Lucumí practices, these groups shared significant religious and musical overlaps across Havana and Matanzas.¹⁵ Nodal explains that African cultural elements gradually integrated with Spanish-derived forms through syncretism, contributing to a distinctly Cuban culture.¹⁶ Manuel and Fiol describe the broader process as musical transculturation, through which African-derived traditions interacted both with one another and with European music.¹⁷

Crucially, transculturation did not signify the erosion of original cultural meanings. Rather, it entailed the strategic preservation, adaptation, and recombination of displaced traditions, producing new Cuban practices while leaving earlier cultural foundations recognizable. Ultimately, the survival of these evolving traditions relied on the resilient institutional infrastructure of Afro-Cuban religious communities.

Religion, Community, and Cultural Preservation

One prominent African-derived religious system in Cuba is Regla de Ocha (commonly called Santería or Regla Lucumí), which Manuel and Fiol describe as a Cuban form of

¹² Manuel and Fiol, "Mode, Melody, and Harmony," 47.

¹³ Manuel and Fiol, "Mode, Melody, and Harmony," 48.

¹⁴ Manuel and Fiol, "Mode, Melody, and Harmony," 48.

¹⁵ Manuel and Fiol, "Mode, Melody, and Harmony," 48.

¹⁶ Nodal, "Social Evolution of the Afro-Cuban Drum," 157.

¹⁷ Manuel and Fiol, "Mode, Melody, and Harmony," 46.

interrelated Yoruba practices and beliefs.¹⁸ Orishas are deities within this Yoruba-derived religious system.¹⁹ Its public ceremonies combine songs and batá drumming to praise the Orishas and invite their manifestation through spiritual possession.²⁰ Cultural transmission also occurred through *cabildos*, mutual-aid societies in Havana and Matanzas where enslaved and free people of color protected elements of Yoruba culture.²¹

Historically, sacred drums were reserved for ritual ceremonies and played by initiated specialists, whereas secular drums accompanied popular forms such as conga, rumba, and son.²² Within Yoruba-based traditions, each Orisha is represented through an interconnected system of colors, numbers, foods, music, dance postures, and symbols.²³ Dance therefore belongs to a larger religious and aesthetic structure rather than functioning as an isolated movement.

Relationship Among Dance, Music, and Song

In Cuba and Nigeria, batá drums function both as surrogate speech-mimicking the tones of the Yoruba language-and as rhythmic accompaniment for singing and dancing.²⁴ This communicative structure also appears in Santería *cantos*, which use call-and-response between a specialized lead singer and a chorus.²⁵ During public *toques de santo*, songs are accompanied by batá drums, the *acheré* rattle, and hand clapping, while specific musical sections must be performed in sequence with accompanying choreography.²⁶

Nodal similarly explains that a skilled batá drummer must know “a multitude of liturgies,

¹⁸ Manuel and Fiol, “Mode, Melody, and Harmony,” 46–47.

¹⁹ Manuel and Fiol, “Mode, Melody, and Harmony,” 48.

²⁰ Manuel and Fiol, “Mode, Melody, and Harmony,” 48.

²¹ Manuel and Fiol, “Mode, Melody, and Harmony,” 47–48.

²² Nodal, “Social Evolution of the Afro-Cuban Drum,” 162–63.

²³ Marta Moreno Vega, “The Ancestral Sacred Creative Impulse of Africa and the African Diaspora: Ase, the Nexus of the Black Global Aesthetic,” *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 5 (1999): 49–50.

²⁴ Manuel and Fiol, “Mode, Melody, and Harmony,” 48.

²⁵ Manuel and Fiol, “Mode, Melody, and Harmony,” 49.

²⁶ Manuel and Fiol, “Mode, Melody, and Harmony,” 49.

rhythms, and dances.”²⁷ Afro-Cuban performance is therefore best understood as an “orchestration of media” in which movement, music, language, gesture, ritual, and communal participation operate together.²⁸

Theoretical Framework: Dance as Embodied Cultural Memory

Cultural knowledge is not transmitted exclusively through written records or verbal explanation; it is also stored and communicated through movement, rhythm, gesture, repetition, and collective participation.

Performance as Embodied Knowledge

Performance theorist Carrie Viarnes describes performance as a system for “learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge” and explains that possession practices rooted in myth make the body a vessel for the transmission of cultural memory.²⁹ Viarnes notes that rites become inscribed in the body as “gestural and kinesic memory.” She also discusses the power of repeated ceremonies, in which participants engage memory through habitual bodily behavior.³⁰ Memory is not merely recalled intellectually; it is repeatedly practiced and made present.

Miguel Arnedo explains that ritual performance conveys, sustains, and reinforces images of the African past through calendrical, verbal, and gestural repetition. He characterizes Afro-Cuban rituals and secular celebrations as “orchestrations of media” that combine language with nonverbal forms such as music and dance.³¹

Cultural Continuity Through Adaptation

Moreno Vega explains that *ase* (spiritual energy) appears under different names throughout the African diaspora, maintaining its central importance even as its expressions

²⁷ Nodal, “Social Evolution of the Afro-Cuban Drum,” 166.

²⁸ Miguel Arnedo, “Afrocubanista Poetry and Afro-Cuban Performance,” *The Modern Language Review* 96, no. 4 (2001): 994.

²⁹ Viarnes, “Cultural Memory in Afro-Cuban Possession,” 131.

³⁰ Viarnes, “Cultural Memory in Afro-Cuban Possession,” 131–33.

³¹ Arnedo, “‘Afrocubanista’ Poetry,” 993–94.

transform across locations.³² She notes the Yoruba appreciation of “freshness and improvisation” in the arts and argues that African-based aesthetic practices have demonstrated an ability to improvise while maintaining the foundations of traditional sacred systems.³³ Cultural continuity can therefore coexist with choreographic change when movement remains connected to its cultural foundations.

The Limits and Risks of Adaptation

Nevertheless, the adaptation of sacred forms into secular environments carries inherent risks. Arnedo illustrates this shift through the migration of ritual movement into secular *rumba* performance. He observes that dances linked to *Changó*, *Palo*, *Makuta*, and *Abakuá* supplied physical gestures that were ultimately “devoid of their religious significance,” rendering their physical execution to become “performative rather than representational.”³⁴

A parallel concern is structural homogenization. Martínez-Echazábal cautions against placing distinct African-derived religious practices under the umbrella term “Afro-Cuban religion” as if they formed a “homogeneous, monolithic entity,” because doing so can erase the unique and complex qualities of each tradition.³⁵

Analyzing post-revolutionary Cuban cultural policy, Martínez-Echazábal shows how ancestral Yoruba songs and dances were systematically popularized and aestheticized for stage presentation. She contends that this institutional staging reduced integrated, living social practices to “exotic fragments for touristic and popular consumption,” recasting sacred experience into “de-sacralized forms of popular expression.”³⁶ Ultimately, these three dynamics operate in tandem: decontextualization preserves superficial choreography while severing

³² Moreno Vega, “Ancestral Sacred Creative Impulse,” 45.

³³ Moreno Vega, “Ancestral Sacred Creative Impulse,” 49, 52.

³⁴ Miguel Arnedo, “The Portrayal of the Afro-Cuban Female Dancer in Cuban ‘Negrista’ Poetry,” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 16, no. 2 (1997): 30, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23054013>.

³⁵ Martínez-Echazábal, “Politics of Afro-Cuban Religion,” 16.

³⁶ Martínez-Echazábal, “Politics of Afro-Cuban Religion,” 19.

relational context; homogenization flattens lineage distinctions; and commercialization often prioritizes spectacle over cultural meaning.

Research Methodology and Positionality

Research Methods

This study combines scholarly research with ethnographic participant observation conducted in Afro-Cuban dance classes in New York City and Miami during the summer of 2026. I recorded field notes following each class, documenting movement patterns, musical structures, teaching methods, verbal explanations, and forms of participation among dancers and musicians. These observations were then compared with scholarly accounts of Afro-Cuban religion, music, cultural memory, and diasporic transmission.

Participant-Observer Position

Through participant observation, I could experience how rhythm directed movement, how repetition built bodily familiarity, and how an instructor's historical explanation changed the way a gesture was executed.

My prior dance training in ballet and contemporary dance influenced how I understood unfamiliar movement. While technical training helped me analyze posture, rhythm, and weight distribution, it also brought the risk of imposing Western concert-dance standards onto traditions governed by different cultural principles. I therefore carefully distinguished between what I directly observed, what instructors explicitly explained, and what I later interpreted through scholarly research.

I also entered these studios as a student observer rather than as an initiated practitioner or long-standing member of the communities represented.

Ethical and Interpretive Limits

Certain dimensions of religious knowledge are transmitted only through initiation, long-term participation, or relationships of trust within a community. When an instructor did not explain the spiritual meaning of a movement, I avoided assigning one solely based on visual appearance.

Additionally, the study does not treat New York City and Miami as representative of every Afro-Cuban community in the United States. Each observation reflects a specific instructor, institution, class format, studio setting, and group of students. Rather than making broad generalizations, this fieldwork offers two comparative case studies to examine a focused question: how cultural knowledge is preserved, adapted, or decontextualized when Afro-Cuban dance is taught in public U.S. studio spaces.

Afro-Cuban Dance in New York City

Fieldwork Settings and Scope

My New York fieldwork took place across several educational settings during June 2026. At the Teranga Conference at Ailey Studios, I attended lectures on cultural lineage and dance pedagogy and participated in a West African dance workshop led by Maguette Camara. On June 24, I attended an Afro-Cuban class taught by Jinae Suire at World Arts East. Four days later, I participated in a modern Cuban dance class taught by Noibis Licea at Ailey Studios. Together, these experiences revealed several ways in which African and Afro-Caribbean movement traditions are transmitted within New York's diverse institutional dance environment.

Not all of the material taught at the Teranga Conference was strictly Afro-Cuban. Camara's workshop, for example, centered on West African movement and traditions from Guinea. Nevertheless, these experiences provided a vital diasporic framework for interpreting the Afro-Cuban classes. They demonstrated pedagogical principles—including live musical exchange,

communal participation, respect for cultural lineage, and embodied learning. Maintaining the distinctions among these traditions is essential as comparison can reveal shared diasporic concerns without treating culturally specific forms as interchangeable.

Cultural Lineage and Dance Pedagogy at the Teranga Conference

The lectures at the Teranga Conference framed cultural transmission as an educational responsibility. Allan Rocero Gitanes examined the relationship between movement, institutional lineage, and decolonizing pedagogy through discussions of Horton and Dunham techniques. He asked, “How do we teach students to carry culture in their bodies?”, arguing that a classroom could function either as “a sanctuary” or as “a site of assimilation.”³⁴³⁷ His questions shifted the purpose of dance education away from technical replication alone. The teaching of movement without its history assimilates culturally specific practices into a generic dance vocabulary; teaching lineage and context alongside technique makes the classroom a site of cultural preservation.

Careitha Davis further emphasized the responsibility to acknowledge the people and communities behind the traditions. She began her lecture with photographs of influential figures in dance history, drawing attention to how easily choreographic legacies can be separated from the individuals who created and transmitted them.³⁸ Discussing Katherine Dunham and Afro-Caribbean performance, Davis presented movement, music, costume, ritual, and gesture as interconnected carriers of historical and spiritual meaning.

One performance Davis discussed used a dancer’s flowing skirt to symbolize resistance to political and social oppression, showing that cultural meaning is communicated through

³⁷ Summer Park, field notes from lecture by Allan Rocero Gitanes, Teranga Conference, Ailey Studios, New York City, June 13, 2026.

³⁸ Summer Park, field notes from lecture by Careitha Davis, Teranga Conference, Ailey Studios, New York City, June 13, 2026.

objects as well as choreography. Davis also re-interpreted familiar performance conventions with observed Afro-diasporic practices: rather than viewing a bow simply as asking for applause, she described low head inclinations as gestures of gratitude toward ancestors and elders. Even the removal of costumes and makeup after a performance could continue this process of remembrance.³⁹ In this framework, performance did not end when the choreography concluded; it remained part of an ongoing relationship with those who had transmitted the tradition including the dancers.

These lectures reinforced the concept of performance as embodied cultural memory. Cultural preservation depended not simply on retaining recognizable movement, but also on teaching who created it, what histories it carried, and toward whom its gestures were directed.

Rhythm and Community in Maguette Camara's West African Workshop

The following day, I participated in Maguette Camara's West African dance workshop accompanied by live percussion, including the *djembe*, *dunun*, *kenkeni*, and *sangban*. Some drums were played with bare hands, while others required sticks; their differing sounds combined to form a layered rhythmic structure. Dancers and musicians alike shared the physical intensity. Drummers adjusted their hand placement and the force of each strike to match the dancers' energy, while the dancers responded to the evolving rhythms.⁴⁰

The spatial arrangement reinforced this connection: instead of facing the mirrors, combinations were directed toward the drummers. This simple shift pivoted our focus from self-critical reflection to an active dialogue with the musicians. The drummers were not background accompaniment, nor were we dancing over a static beat. Together, we inhabited a shared framework where rhythm translated directly into movement.

³⁹ Park, field notes from Davis lecture.

⁴⁰ Summer Park, field notes from West African dance workshop taught by Maguette Camara, Teranga Conference, Ailey Studios, New York City, June 14, 2026.

Camara also connected movement to natural imagery, using sweeping arm gestures to evoke wind and other environmental forces. In my field notes, I described the studio's Marley floor as seeming to turn to soil and the enclosed room as opening into wind and mountains.

The workshop concluded in a circle. Participants entered the center individually while the rest of the group encouraged their movement; afterward, the class moved together and thanked each drummer by lowering their heads and reaching a hand toward the floor. The circle replaced the front-facing orientation common to many concert-dance classes with a communal structure in which participants watched, supported, and acknowledged one another. Although Camara's workshop represented a West African rather than an Afro-Cuban tradition, it provided an important comparison: cultural knowledge was transmitted through spatial organization, musical exchange, gratitude, and collective participation, as well as through the movement combinations themselves.

Orisha Movement at World Arts East

On June 24, I attended an Afro-Cuban class taught by Jinae Suire at World Arts East. Suire opened by explaining that dancers and musicians work together as joint storytellers, functioning cohesively as one. Throughout the session, the drummers sang while playing, and students learned movement in direct relationship to their rhythms. Music was not merely introduced after the choreography as accompaniment; it was part of the structure through which students learned timing, energy, expression, and intention.

The class centered on dances for the *Orishas*. In one sequence, Suire connected sweeping arms and rapid turns to *Oyá* and to the forces of wind, storms, and tornadoes. Her explanation transformed how we performed the movement. The gestures were no longer just fast or athletic, but intentional expressions of natural forces.

Another section focused on *Ogún*, incorporating grounded, heavy movements and gestures mimicking the clearing of paths with a machete, highlighting the importance of labor, protection, and warrior qualities. Suire instructed students to maintain serious facial expressions, emphasizing that visual focus carries cultural meaning in the dance.⁴¹ This direction demonstrated the difference between reproducing the outline of a gesture and embodying the qualities attached to it. Movement, expression, imagined objects, and spiritual symbolism worked together rather than operating as separate theatrical additions.

The class ended communally. Participants first stood in a circle, then sat to stretch, and finally lay silently on the floor while reflecting on their connection to the earth.⁴² This conclusion should not automatically be classified as a complete religious ritual, particularly from the perspective of an uninitiated participant. Nevertheless, its structure reinforced themes that had shaped the class: connection to nature, collective participation, and movement as more than physical exercise.

Suire's teaching illustrates how a public New York classroom can adapt Orisha-related movement without presenting it solely as choreography. The institutional setting, time constraints, and diverse student population necessarily altered the original context of transmission. Yet movement remained connected to live percussion, singing, spiritual figures, natural forces, facial expression, and communal reflection.

Adaptation in Modern Cuban Dance

My June 28 class with Noibis Licea at Ailey Studios offered a different model of cultural transmission, blending Afro-Cuban movement with modern dance frameworks rather than just religious ones. The class began with closed eyes, concentrated breathing, and instrumental

⁴¹ Park, field notes from Suire class.

⁴² Park, field notes from Suire class.

music, establishing a grounded physical focus before movement began. Licea then combined Afro-Cuban movement qualities with Graham-based principles, arabesques, floorwork, turns, and traveling combinations.⁴³

This adaptation demonstrated that transformation does not necessarily require abandoning cultural foundations. I found intricate footwork and turns enjoyable, yet a seemingly simple forward walk with coordinated hip movement proved far more difficult. My prior training in dance had prepared me to control and stabilize certain areas of the body; Licea's movement required a different organization of the pelvis, torso, rhythm, and weight. It called for reconsidering how the body could generate and respond to movement.

Spanish terminology also appeared throughout the class, as Licea introduced students to Makuta movement. In a later combination set to a song repeating *gallina*, or “chicken,” students embodied the animal's qualities through playful gesture and characterization.⁴⁴ The combination demonstrated how imagery and humor could support physical understanding.

Afro-Cuban Dance in Miami

Fieldwork Setting

My Miami fieldwork centered on Afro-Cuban dance classes taught by Marisol Blanco at the Koubek Center in Little Havana. On July 7 and July 9, 2026, I participated in *Baila! Little Havana*, a Cuban folkloric dance class in which movement instruction was consistently accompanied by explanations of history, rhythm, labor, spirituality, and symbolism.⁴⁵ Unlike the broader diasporic setting of my New York fieldwork, Blanco's pedagogy centered specifically on the transmission of Cuban cultural knowledge.

⁴³ Summer Park, field notes from modern Cuban dance class taught by Noibis Licea, Ailey Studios, New York City, June 28, 2026.

⁴⁴ Park, field notes from Licea class.

⁴⁵ Summer Park, field notes from *Baila! Little Havana* Cuban folkloric dance classes taught by Marisol Blanco, Koubek Center, Miami, July 7 and 9, 2026.

Blanco did not structure the classes around choreography alone. Instead, instruction moved continuously between explanation and embodiment/execution: students learned where a dance came from, listened for its rhythmic structure, practiced its steps, and encountered the stories or cultural practices associated with those movements.

The HPS Method: History, Percussion, and Step/Song

Blanco operationalizes this framework through the HPS Method: History, Percussion, and Step/Song.⁴⁶ This structural hierarchy is deliberate; physical technique represents only a single dimension of the methodology. History anchors the socio-historical conditions that birthed the dance; Percussion provides the foundational rhythmic matrix for bodily movement; and Steps and Songs engage students in both physical and vocal performance of the tradition.

Consequently, the HPS Method actively resists instructional models centered solely on visual imitation. During the July 7 class, Blanco continuously interspersed physical execution with contextual commentary, connecting movement to music, work, and everyday Cuban experience.⁴⁷

Labor as Embodied Cultural Memory

The relationship between movement and cultural history was especially clear in *Pilón* and *Molienda de Café*. In class, Blanco connected these dances to physical actions associated with labor, particularly the pounding, grinding, and processing of agricultural products.⁴⁸

This process was particularly evident in *Molienda de Café*. Blanco taught a recurring footwork pattern through the sounds “kah” and “chang.” On the “kah,” I slid the active foot outward and slightly backward while maintaining contact with the floor. On the “chang,” I

⁴⁶ Summer Park, field notes from Afro-Cuban dance class taught by Marisol Blanco, Koubek Center, Miami, July 7, 2026.

⁴⁷ Park, field notes, July 7, 2026.

⁴⁸ Park, field notes, July 7, 2026.

transferred weight into the sliding foot as the hip settled with the rhythm.⁴⁹ What looked like simple footwork required precise control of weight, timing, hips, and contact with the ground. The rhythm had to be transferred into the placement of my feet, the shifting of my weight, and the response of my pelvis and torso.

Nature, Objects, and Symbolic Movement

The July 9 class shifted the emphasis from histories of labor toward nature, cleansing, and collective participation. A guest teacher conducted much of the instruction in Spanish, and the class incorporated handkerchiefs and fresh leaves and branches gathered from trees surrounding the Koubek Center.⁵⁰ Dancers performed sweeping gestures with their arms mimicking the movement of leaves, branches, and processes of cleansing. Blanco and the guest instructor associated the sweeping actions with cleansing that extended beyond physical cleanliness to the body, mind, and spirit.⁵¹

Language, Percussion, and Collective Participation

Because much of the instruction was delivered in Spanish, demonstration, rhythm, repetition, facial expression, objects, and collective response provided essential extra layers of communication.⁵² The guest instructor established rhythms with wooden sticks (*claves*) before recorded music played, requiring participants to respond vocally while moving together with dancers at times lifting their skirts as part of the sequence.⁵³

The partial language barrier also revealed both the possibilities and limitations of embodied transmission. Movement allowed me to participate before I possessed complete verbal understanding, yet physical participation could not render explanation unnecessary. While

⁴⁹ Park, field notes, July 7, 2026.

⁵⁰ Summer Park, field notes from Afro-Cuban dance class taught by Marisol Blanco and guest instructor, Koubek Center, Miami, July 9, 2026.

⁵¹ Park, field notes, July 9, 2026.

⁵² Park, field notes, July 9, 2026.

⁵³ Park, field notes, July 9, 2026.

demonstration communicated *how* to perform an action, verbal and historical context clarified *why* that action mattered. The synthesis of the two was therefore far more culturally informative than either could be in isolation.

New York and Miami: Two Models of Diasporic Transmission

My New York experiences placed Afro-Cuban dance within a broader network of West African and Caribbean diasporic traditions, while Marisol Blanco's Miami classes concentrated on connecting Cuban folkloric movement to particular histories, rhythms, songs, and social practices.⁵⁴

Shared Principles of Transmission

Despite differences in setting and teaching style, the New York and Miami classes prioritized the relationship between dancers and live music. In Jinae Suire's New York class, drummers sang while playing, and students were taught to view dancers and musicians as participants in a single structure. At the Teranga Conference, Maguette Camara likewise directed dancers toward the musicians rather than toward a mirror. In Miami, Blanco's HPS Method placed percussion alongside history and step/song as a fundamental component of instruction.⁵⁵ Across these settings, music did not simply accompany choreography after movement had been learned; rhythm helped organize how movement was understood and physically executed.

This relationship reflects Arnedo's characterization of Afro-Cuban performance as an "orchestration of media" involving interconnected verbal and nonverbal forms, including music and dance.⁵⁶ Students learned through listening, watching, repeating, singing, responding to

⁵⁴ Summer Park, field notes from Afro-Cuban and African diasporic dance classes and lectures, World Arts East and Ailey Studios, New York City, June 2026; Summer Park, field notes from *Baila! Little Havana* classes taught by Marisol Blanco, Koubek Center, Miami, July 7 and 9, 2026.

⁵⁵ Park, field notes from class taught by Jinae Suire, World Arts East, June 24, 2026; Park, field notes from West African dance workshop taught by Maguette Camara, Teranga Conference, Ailey Studios, June 2026; Park, field notes from class taught by Marisol Blanco, Koubek Center, July 7, 2026.

⁵⁶ Arnedo, "'Afrocubanista' Poetry," 994.

percussion, and moving collectively.

Communal participation formed another point of continuity. Both the Camara workshop in New York and Suire's class concluded in circular formations, while the Miami classes incorporated collective rhythm, vocal response, and repeated movement.⁵⁷ These structures shifted emphasis away from dance as an exclusively individual display.

Differences in Pedagogy and Emphasis

Blanco's Miami pedagogy was systematically grounded in the cultural contexts of specific Cuban dance forms. Her HPS Method (History, Percussion, and Step/Song) embedded contextual knowledge directly into the instructional sequence.⁵⁸

Where the New York workshops prioritized relational connection, linking dancers to drummers, movement to nature, and contemporary students to diasporic lineages, the Miami curriculum emphasized contextual reconstruction. In Miami, instruction systematically identified the historical roots of a movement and established its rhythmic foundation before guiding students toward physical embodiment.

The Role of Place

In New York, my fieldwork shifted between World Arts East and Ailey Studios, where Afro-Cuban material intersected with West African, Afro-Caribbean, modern, and other diasporic practices.⁵⁹

While this institutional proximity invited comparative analysis, it equally demanded attention to cultural specificity. As Martínez-Echazábal cautions, collapsing distinct African-derived practices into a "homogeneous, monolithic entity" risks erasing their specific

⁵⁷ Park, field notes from Camara workshop, June 2026; Park, field notes from Suire class, June 24, 2026; Park, field notes from Blanco classes, July 7 and 9, 2026.

⁵⁸ Park, field notes from Blanco class, July 7, 2026.

⁵⁹ Park, field notes from New York fieldwork, June 2026.

historical and stylistic nuances.⁶⁰ Shared elements—such as polyrhythmic structures, communal participation, or embodied pedagogies—can highlight historical ties without rendering Yoruba-derived, Guinean, and Cuban traditions interchangeable.

By contrast, my Miami fieldwork generated a distinct relationship to geographic and cultural places. Blanco's classes at the Koubek Center in Little Havana explicitly privileged Cuban folkloric dance, embedding Cuban history and terminology as central, constant components of instruction.⁶¹ Ultimately, place determined not whether cultural preservation occurred, but rather the pedagogical frame through which it was mediated.

Preservation of Movement Versus Preservation of Meaning

Ultimately, comparing the New York and Miami sites clarifies the vital distinction between preserving movement and preserving meaning. Arnedo illustrates this divide historically: as movements and gestures shifted from Afro-Cuban ritual dances into secular rumba, certain forms became “devoid of their religious significance,” rendering their physicality “performative rather than representational.”⁶² The outer physical form persisted, even as its connection to a sacred worldview evolved.

My fieldwork indicates that instructors actively resist this desacralization by embedding movement within its broader relational network. In New York, Suire tied movement gestures to Orishas, natural forces, live percussion, expressive agency, and communal participation. In Miami, Blanco linked movement steps directly to history, labor, percussion, song, and symbolism.⁶³ Though neither environment could fully reconstruct the original social or sacred contexts of these practices, contextual grounding ensured that students received far more than a

⁶⁰ Martínez-Echazábal, “Politics of Afro-Cuban Religion,” 16.

⁶¹ Park, field notes from Blanco classes, Koubek Center, Miami, July 7 and 9, 2026.

⁶² Arnedo, “Portrayal of the Afro-Cuban Female Dancer,” 30.

⁶³ Park, field notes from Suire class, June 24, 2026; Park, field notes from Blanco classes, July 7 and 9, 2026.

physical template to imitate.

In a similar vein, Moreno Vega characterizes African diasporic traditions as inherently adaptive and improvisational systems that nevertheless preserve foundational frameworks of meaning.⁶⁴ Within this framework, preservation inherently allows for adaptation—so long as structural shifts do not detach a practice from the web of cultural relationships that render it intelligible.

Finally, Martínez-Echazábal's warning against reducing living practices to "exotic fragments" through public performance highlights why physical visibility alone cannot be equated with genuine cultural preservation.⁶⁵

Historical Case Study: Katherine Dunham

Ethnographic Research and Choreography

Dunham's fieldwork spanned Jamaica, Martinique, Trinidad, and Haiti, though Haiti proved particularly transformative for her understanding of African diasporic culture.⁶⁶ As Joanna Dee Das notes, Dunham analyzed dance as an integral element of a "larger Haitian social structure," situating movement within its surrounding religious and social environments rather than isolating it as a purely physical vocabulary.⁶⁷ In a similar vein, Moreno Vega highlights Dunham as a key artist who immersed herself in African diasporic traditions, explicitly grounding her creative work in rigorous ethnographic research.⁶⁸

Translation to the Concert Stage

By 1940, as Das explains, Dunham had formalized a methodology of "fusion,"

⁶⁴ Moreno Vega, "Ancestral Sacred Creative Impulse," 52.

⁶⁵ Martínez-Echazábal, "Politics of Afro-Cuban Religion," 19.

⁶⁶ Joanna Dee Das, *Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 43–44.

⁶⁷ Das, *Katherine Dunham*, 44.

⁶⁸ Marta Moreno Vega, "The Ancestral Sacred Creative Impulse of Africa and the African Diaspora: Ase, the Nexus of the Black Global Aesthetic," *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 5 (1999): 52.

synthesizing her classical ballet and modern-dance training with Afro-Caribbean movement forms.⁶⁹

Yet this theatrical translation inevitably revealed the tensions inherent in adaptation. Moreno Vega highlights Dunham's *Shango Suite* as a prime example—a stage translation of a sacred *bembé* that synthesized ritual practices from Cuba, Haiti, and Trinidad. While the performance incorporated iconography that retained sacred resonance for initiated or culturally knowledgeable audiences, secular spectators often consumed these same symbols merely as aesthetic elements of theatrical staging.⁷⁰

Furthermore, Das points to a fundamental tension in codifying movement traditions grounded in improvisation. Institutionalizing and extracting vernacular forms from the communal environments that sustained them, she argues, risks diluting their radical political and collective efficacy.⁷¹

Teaching and Transmission

Dunham also institutionalized her approach through education, opening the Katherine Dunham School of Dance in Manhattan in 1944 to train future generations of performers and choreographers.⁷²

Cultural Visibility, Commercialization, and Misrepresentation

Visibility and Commercialization

Nodal details how international record labels capitalized on European and North American demand for Afro-Cuban rhythms, circulating them globally in forms he characterizes as distorted and “vulgarly commercialized.”⁷³ Although Afro-Cuban instrumentation gained

⁶⁹ Das, *Katherine Dunham*, 56.

⁷⁰ Moreno Vega, “Ancestral Sacred Creative Impulse,” 51–52.

⁷¹ Das, *Katherine Dunham*, 64.

⁷² Das, *Katherine Dunham*, 7.

⁷³ Roberto Nodal, “The Social Evolution of the Afro-Cuban Drum,” *The Black Perspective in Music* 11, no. 2 (1983): 162, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1214911>.

access to commercial venues worldwide, market demands selectively dictated which elements of these traditions were preserved and presented.⁷⁴

Martínez-Echazábal identifies this contradiction in public presentations of African-derived religion in Cuba. She demonstrates how living sacred practices were frequently reconfigured into historical artifacts and aesthetic spectacles for public consumption, even as contemporary religious practice remained marginalized. In this commodification process, holistic cultural traditions risked being reduced to “exotic fragments for touristic and popular consumption.”⁷⁵ Ultimately, she argues, this secularization converted Afro-Cuban religious traditions into “de-sacralized forms of popular expression” that were rendered legible, economically valuable, and politically permissible.⁷⁶

Misreading Movement

Arnedo demonstrates that distinguishing sacred from secular movement presents a key challenge for outside observers, as rumba frequently incorporates choreographic references to Orishas without enacting their accompanying ritual functions.⁷⁷ He points to one notable account in which observers misread rumba dancers as undergoing spiritual possession, projecting a sacred experience onto a performance where none occurred.⁷⁸

Recognizing these boundaries as a participant-observer, I deliberately refrained from projecting sacred meaning onto movement gestures beyond what instructors explicitly communicated in class.

Responsibility in Cultural Transmission

Ultimately, responsible cultural transmission requires neither static preservation nor the

⁷⁴ Nodal, “Social Evolution of the Afro-Cuban Drum,” 162.

⁷⁵ Lourdes Martínez-Echazábal, “The Politics of Afro-Cuban Religion in Contemporary Cuban Cinema,” *Afro-Hispanic Review* 13, no. 1 (1994): 19, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42656432>.

⁷⁶ Martínez-Echazábal, “Politics of Afro-Cuban Religion,” 19.

⁷⁷ Arnedo, “Portrayal of the Afro-Cuban Female Dancer,” 30.

⁷⁸ Arnedo, “Portrayal of the Afro-Cuban Female Dancer,” 29–30.

artificial replication of sacred contexts within public settings. Instead, it demands an explicit acknowledgment of historical transformation, the precise contextualization of cultural origins, and an active refusal to present an adapted fragment as a whole tradition.⁷⁹

Conclusion

Fieldwork across New York and Miami demonstrates that cultural preservation hinges not on freezing movement in place, but on sustaining its vitality through rhythm, history, spirituality, symbolism, labor, and community. A step may endure in physical form while shedding the embodied knowledge that gave it meaning, just as choreography may evolve while safeguarding its foundational lineage.

Ultimately, Afro-Cuban dance illuminates a defining hallmark of the African diaspora: cultural continuity does not demand cultural immobility. Traditions endure through iterative practice, interpretation, and embodied transmission. To preserve a dance, then, is not merely to archive its physical mechanics, but to honor what and whom it carries forward.

⁷⁹ Moreno Vega, "Ancestral Sacred Creative Impulse," 52.

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