

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Sanchel Brown

Home is underneath your feet

by Ani Gavino

"Baltimore is home...a place I will always return to when life knocks the wind out of me."

- Sanchel Brown quoting Nina Simone.

Like Simone, Brown has returned to Baltimore after a tumultuous joy ride searching for the meaning of home. *Home to Homeland*, a dance play in three acts narrating her journey from Baltimore to Senegal, premiered in [2019 at Urban Movement Arts \(UMA\)](#). On March 7, she hosted a watch party to celebrate the second anniversary of this premiere.

Brown deconstructed the live performance for virtual sharing. This digital version begins with archival footage of Ella Fitzgerald performing [It Don't Mean A Thing \(If It Ain't Got That Swing\)](#). Then, the screen shifts to the opening of the live performance at UMA. The exuberance of this opening section and the use of a catchy popular tune reminds me of a Broadway musical composition. High-energy, percussive song and dance, and call-and-response acapella singing between Brown and co-performers Ama Gora and Graciella Maiolatesi* invite the audience to snap and swing.

In the next section, Brown takes us to a smaller room of UMA; she demonstrates fast polyrhythmic movements, sings, and spits bars and rhymes, telling us where she is originally from and what community has shaped her—Baltimore.

Throughout the pandemic, Brown used social media platforms to interview Baltimore artists. The artists highlighted on her [Instagram page, @trudancer92](#), give rise to Baltimore's artistic renaissance. Brown cleverly wove together trimmed footage from her interviews with Tedra Wilson, Blair Simms, Unique Robinson, Tanishia Lewis, and Abdu Ali with the live performance in 2021's rendition of *Home to Homeland*.

Through spoken text and movement, Brown tells us of her memories of New Orleans (NOLA), a place she recounts is reminiscent of Baltimore. She narrates that she was greeted by a local, "Hey baby, welcome home!" With brass marching bands playing through the audio, Brown leads the audience to a cypher, reenacting a [second line dance](#). By the end of this section, we see Brown tossing her limbs into the air, feet bouncing as if she were a pulsating fire...shimmying...twerking...and hyping up the crowd. This proclamation of joy energizes the conversations in the zoom chat.

In 2017, Brown impersonated [Wendy Williams](#) in a talk-show style skit to premise *Ode to Black Woman*, an auto-ethnographic solo grappling with unresolved heartbreak. This talk-show style returns in 2021's *Home to Homeland* in order to share her happy memories of Senegal, creating a feeling of continuity and growth from her previous works.

Brown added beautiful and poignant images captured while living in Senegal. One of these images was her dancing in a deserted land with the sun gazing at her. She looked like a spec in this vast scenery, perhaps alluding to the bountiful joy this place brought her, evoking a romantic notion of home. Her dance journey from Baltimore to New Orleans to Senegal shows her burning desire to trace her own lineage. This brings me to reflect on African Americans' continuous search for connection...for the umbilical cord to the motherland that was forever lacerated.

[Amazing Grace](#), a popular American gospel song accompanied this section. This quintessential hymn was written in history as a work by Christian clergyman and slave ship captain, [John Newton](#). These melodic tunes with obvious roots to West African sorrow chants will never be traced to their rightful composers whom Newton took the hymn from. It is untraceable—just like many African Americans' tracings of home. Brown's choice of song spoke profoundly about her journey and those of enslaved people stripped away from a traceable unhyphenated history.

Brown ends the show with a painted memory of Senegal as a place of liberation and new seeds. She also hosted the watch party to celebrate the fruit of her love with Senegal, the birth of her daughter Jole. The creation of *Home to Homeland* in 2019 was perhaps a foreshadowing of Jole's arrival.

I have seen Brown create imprints from place to place, meeting her initially in Richmond, VA. Like a ball of fire, spinning and moving a hundred beats per second, she has [crazy legged, heel-toed, and power stepped](#) her way through life. Brown's journey of going back home—home to mama, home to Africa, home to the community which she serves—is one I respect deeply.

This work made me reflect on my own personal strife of finding a home as an immigrant, only to realize that home is divided by a deep blue Pacific Ocean and years of historical erasure. And yet, despite this, I have the privilege of tracing home to the Philippines. Brown, on the other hand, relies on ancestral memories. Like many African descendants in America who were ripped from the motherland's womb, the exact tracing of lineage will remain a mystery.

Brown's inquiry of identity and definitions of home left her audience with hope. She reminded us that HOME is a journey.....

A ride.....

A search.....

And is underneath your feet.

*Graciella Maiolatesi is a writer with thINKingDANCE.

[Home to Homeland](#), Sanchel Brown, Zoom, March 7.

By Anito Gavino

March 25, 2021