

Article

Mapping a New Humanism in the 1940s: Thelma Johnson Streat between Dance and Painting

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Abstract: Thelma Johnson Streat is perhaps best known as the first African American woman to have work acquired by the Museum of Modern Art. However, in the 1940s–1950s she inhabited multiple coinciding roles: painter, performer, choreographer, cultural ethnographer, and folklore collector. As part of this expansive practice, her canvases display a peculiar movement and animacy while her dances transmit the restraint of the two-dimensional figure. Drawing from black feminist theoretical redefinitions of the human, this paper argues that Streat’s exploration of muralism, African American spirituals, Native Northwest Coast cultural production, and Yaqui Mexican-Indigenous folk music established a diasporic mapping forged through the coextension of gesture and brushstroke. This transmedial work disorients colonial cartographies which were the products of displacement, conquest, and dispossession, aiding notions of a new humanism at mid-century.

Keywords: performance; primitivism; modernism; dance; African American art

1. Introduction

In 1942, Alfred Barr bought a small gouache painting called *Rabbit Man* for the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Purchased directly from the artist, Thelma Johnson Streat, this was the first object by an African American woman to enter MoMA’s permanent collection. On the canvas, a central anthropomorphic form washed in black, brick red, and dusty blue emerges out of pared down, isolated geometric shapes: two ovoid rings, patterned with zig-zags and rectangular blocks, construct a torso and a bottom flattened to be coterminous with the paperboard. Drawing loosely from a Cubist formal vocabulary, each shape divides the figure into forms signifying parts of the body: a triangle equals “nose”; circles filled in with other circles represent “eyes.” While static, the figure nonetheless hums with vibrancy and movement as it raises its wide, fin-like arms and turns its face to the sky (Figure 1).

Scholars of American and African American art have traditionally read *Rabbit Man* as a biomorphic hybrid of man and mask: here, the figure’s symmetrically patterned torso could be understood as a face with rectangular slits signifying eyes, and the raised arms instead connoting ears. Lizetta Lefalle-Collins, for instance, attributes the possibility of a mask in *Rabbit Man* to Streat’s study of Northwest Coast Native culture given that Streat had traveled to Haida Gwaii, formerly known as the Queen Charlotte Islands, in British Columbia (Lafalle-Collins 1997). In a different read of the image, Ann Eden Gibson takes *Rabbit Man* at its immediately perceptible silhouette, comparing it to a Kota reliquary guardian figure from Gabon (1997). *Rabbit Man* has also been compared to the early, Jungian paintings of Jackson Pollock, as well as pictographic works by Adolph Gottlieb (Gibson 1997; Bullington 2005). Yet Streat was not considered an Abstract Expressionist painter, in part because her work eschewed the gestural markings that were seen to index an authentic inner selfhood. What I want to call attention to in Streat’s painting, however, is not its wealth of iconographic references, but the implication of motion. By transmitting the painted figure through staged movement and expressive gesture, or injecting painting with animacy, does Streat exist between traditional mediums? Or does

she nest one inside the other, such that we only understand performance vis-à-vis the characteristics of painting?



Figure 1. Thelma Johnson Streat, *Rabbit Man*, 1941 gouache on board, 6 5/8 in. × 4 7/8 in. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY. Courtesy of The Johnson Collection.

The performative condition of *Rabbit Man*, the dynamism with which we might read the figure's raised limbs, is heightened when understood through Streat's career as a dancer, and her wide-ranging ethnographic research—a dual practice she shared with dancer-ethnographers like Katherine Dunham, Zora Neale Hurston, and Pearl Primus. Indeed, one reporter would even term Streat “a one-woman Katherine Dunham troupe.”¹ Streat incorporated African American spirituals, Native Northwest Coast cultural production, and Yaqui Mexican-Indigenous folk music into her visual and performative works, negotiating multiple cultural and spatial positions throughout the Americas. Drawing on the black feminist and decolonial writings of Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, I argue that Streat's work inscribes new understandings of the human than that traditionally broached in the forties and fifties.

McKittrick's “cartography of black women's geographies” sees space and place as they are conditioned by black women's histories (McKittrick 2006, p. 11). All geography becomes fundamentally subjective and multifaceted in this view, rather than extracted in such a way that de-spatializes the experiences of black diasporic subjects. As a result, the category of “human” itself is seen as socially produced through the hierarchical codes of race, gender, and sexuality that are deployed to make sense of being human. As Wynter has argued, new notions of the human entirely are needed beyond how the concept is presently deployed, if we are to “unsettle” the workings of power and its historic devastation of black and indigenous people in the Americas (Wynter 2003). Thus, citing black women

¹ Marie Perkins, “The Most Democratic Children”, *SF Chronicle*, 17 November 1952 (SFPL).

as valid contributors to how space is produced and shaped, McKittrick refuses dispossession as the only means of geographic relevancy for black subjects. Affect and embodiment instead establish alternatives to cartography and its associations with the control and classification of perceived empty space. Rather than immediately mimic or directly represent the cultures she studied, Streat's work disoriented—without completely dislodging—colonial cartographies that were the products of displacement, conquest, and dispossession.

What can be corroborated about Streat's life has been reconstructed from newspaper articles, performance programs, promotional fliers, a personal scrapbook of material located in the Oregon Historical Society, and consultation with her living family members. Born in Yakima, Washington in 1911, Thelma Johnson descended from African and Cherokee heritage.² She spent her childhood between Pendleton, Oregon and Boise, Idaho and graduated from high school in 1932 in Portland.³ Having started painting at the age of seven, she studied briefly at the Museum Art School in Portland, Oregon, from 1934 to 1935, and then at the University of Oregon's School of Architecture and Allied Arts between 1935 and 1936. At the former institution, her teachers may have included painters Henry Frederick Wentz, the senior instructor, as well as Clara Jane Stephens and Leta Marietta Kennedy (Forster 2018). In 1935, she married Romaine V. Streat, and the couple moved in 1938 to San Francisco, where she is said to have trained with WPA muralists, and purportedly assisted Diego Rivera's *Pan-American Unity* mural. Beginning in 1941, Streat was still based in San Francisco, but made trips to Honolulu and Europe to teach and embark on a "concert tour;"⁴ then, between 1943 and 1945, she lived in Chicago and taught elementary school, the first of many commitments to teaching young people throughout her life. After moving back to California and continuing to travel, in 1948 she divorced Romaine Streat and married Edgar Kline, a playwright and Streat's stage manager. The couple then traveled extensively for Streat's performances in the following years, including to Honolulu, Paris, London, Dublin, and New York. Around 1950, Kline and Streat founded a school called the New School of Creative Expression, in Punaluu, Oahu, which was to teach folklore and culture from around the world to young Hawaiians, with a message of tolerance and acceptance. Though she had previously explored the collecting and teaching of folklore on her own terms and through her own research, Streat was formally studying cultural anthropology at UCLA at the time of her death, in 1959.

Despite what could be viewed as Streat's proto-multiculturalism, her movements in and through multiple cultural spaces posed difficulties. Firstly, the consistent adoption of visual and cultural production beyond her own lived experience raises questions about cultural property and utopic notions of commonality. Her work can be seen as part of a broader modernist investigations of the regenerative possibilities of the human afforded by so-called "primitive" art.⁵ Yet, for Streat, this was not the extractive workings of power predicated on colonial theft that characterized European modernist engagement with African and Oceanic artifacts. Divesting from the masculinist, gendered fantasies of the non-western object, Streat's work was instead accompanied by her desire for pedagogy, artistic exchange, and acknowledgement of the cultures with whom she was in dialogue as agential actors.⁶

² Streat and the Johnson family were not officially enrolled in the Cherokee Nation, though establishing membership was difficult given lack of records for enslaved people, segregation, and Native bias. However, the Johnson family did claim Cherokee ancestry and migrated west from Alabama, part of which is known to be Cherokee ancestral homeland. Thelma Johnson Streat Project, e-mail correspondence with the author, 10 November 2019.

³ While many reports cite Streat's birth year as 1912, the hand-colored frontispiece of a personal scrapbook marks her birth date as 29 August 1911 (OHS).

⁴ According to an invitation saved in the Streat scrapbook, Streat made a public appearance in San Francisco in conjunction with the DeYoung Museum, which sponsored a "Meet the Artist" event in 1941 as a send-off before the artist's travels (OHS).

⁵ This is, of course, the foundational premise of primitivism: using or appropriating forms "other" to oneself in order to pursue the fantasy of purity, wholeness or completion, or to rectify the perceived decline of one's home culture. For Huey Copeland, Streat's cooptation of the "primitive" is a self-conscious construction of herself as *negresse*—or the staged perception of black feminine identity—as well as the desire for cultural continuity, redress, and reparation (Copeland 2010, p. 485).

⁶ On the masculinist notions of primitivism and the persistent connotations of the "primitive" with black and indigenous women's bodies, see (Duncan [1973] 1993; Foster 1985; Solomon-Godeau 1993).

At the same time, I do not wish to imply that her interest in indigeneity depended on a false equivalence between non-white cultures, each of whom experienced state violence and white supremacy differently. After all, it is difficult to determine whether *Rabbit Man* was of interest to Alfred Barr in 1941–1942 for the “primitive” stature of its maker or of its content.⁷ As Kirsten Pai Buick has argued, viewers and collectors have often conflated biography with subject matter, fueling the notion that art offered a direct, unmediated, and authentic extension of African American and/or Native selfhood (Buick 2010). Secondly, the relay between Streat’s painting and performance opens up notions of diasporic difference, particularly in her exchanges with the Pacific rather than the Atlantic so typically theorized in black diaspora.⁸ By literally rupturing two-dimensional visualizations of black culture, Streat opened up the question of relationality—not the “relativism” of Franz Boas’s cultural relativism, but the relational, social interactions that frame blackness when put in relation to indigeneity in particular.⁹ Streat’s interweaving of animacy and stillness reconfigures the “marginal” to the site at which humanist transcendence begins and ends. This transmedial approach helps us reimagine aesthetic understandings of the human, and modernist primitivism’s production of black and indigenous aesthetic space.

2. From Murals to Spirituals

After moving to Chicago in 1945, Streat planned to execute twelve murals that memorialized black laborers’ contributions to science, agriculture, and industry. Once completed, the murals were to be reproduced as large color prints and distributed to elementary schools and libraries.¹⁰ These were images designed specifically to educate children: as one writer reported, Streat was interested in what children would respond to visually, “experimenting over and over until she found the style and content that had definite appeal for a juvenile.”¹¹ She already had some experience plotting out murals: for a 1943 exhibition at the American Contemporary Gallery in Los Angeles, she exhibited a preliminary sketch, *Death of a Black Sailor*, for a mural that she planned to realize in Chicago. As with many other African American leftists, muralism gave Streat a vehicle for critiquing nationalist ideals, in this case the notion that black soldiers should fight for democracy abroad while segregation and Jim Crow were still the law at home. Multiple newspapers reported that after displaying *Death of a Black Sailor*, Streat received threatening letters on at least two occasions from the Ku Klux Klan.¹²

Streat has also long been associated with Diego Rivera, purportedly assisting his execution of the *Pan-American Unity* mural commissioned for the 1940 Golden Gate International Exposition in San Francisco.¹³ Rivera’s massive fresco, at twenty-two feet high and seventy-four feet wide, was intended for an exhibit called *Art-in-Action*, where visitors could watch him and his assistants paint in real time;

⁷ We have no evidence of why *Rabbit Man* was specifically of interest to Barr, only that he was supportive of Streat in correspondence after the painting was acquired, for instance agreeing to write her a letter of recommendation for the Albert M. Bender Grants in Aid. See Alfred Barr, Letter to Thelma Johnson Streat, July 1, 1942. Alfred H. Barr, Jr. Papers, I.A.65, mf 2168: 589. New York: The Museum of Modern Art Archives.

⁸ Beginning with Paul Gilroy’s formulation of the Black Atlantic as the “counter-culture of modernity”, or the contact zone between regions involved in the transatlantic slave trade, the Atlantic Ocean has been consistently privileged as the space of black diaspora. However, as Brent Hayes Edwards has pointed out, Black Atlantic leaves little space for exploring diaspora as a transnational network throughout the western hemisphere (Edwards 2001). I further take my cue from Denise Cruz’s elaboration of “transpacific”, a formulation of contact that includes the Pacific, and its Asian and indigenous cultures (Cruz 2012).

⁹ Boas became known for his critique of positivist method in anthropology, which had bound the ideas of evolution and race to justify notions of racial inferiority. Instead, he championed a reparative and preservative theory of cultural relativism that studied objects within their historical and social contexts. However, an emphasis on cultural inheritance would continue to neglect the structural workings of power and dispossession, omissions that continued to mark anthropology as a discipline (Simpson 2018).

¹⁰ See “Frisco Artist in New Role”, *Chicago Defender*, July 21, 1945, p. 17.

¹¹ Catherine Jones, “Thelma Streat Comes Home: Artist Tells Plans in Child Education”, *The Oregonian*, June 17, 1945, p. 5.

¹² See “Brush Strokes”, *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 1943: C8, and “Coast Painter Gets Two Threats By Klan”, *Chicago Defender*, December 4, 1943, p. 5.

¹³ Judy Bullington quotes the testimony of Beatrice Judd Ryan, California’s supervisor of Federal Art Project exhibitions and one of the organizers of the *Pan-American Unity* mural (in full called *Unión de la Expresión Artística del Norte y Sur de este*

they could also interact with California-based painters, sculptors, printmakers, weavers, and potters, all of whom were performing their crafts in makeshift “ateliers.” Film footage depicting *Art-in-Action* shows an assistant to Rivera who is often assumed to be Streat, but has recently been identified as Miné Okubo, an artist of Japanese descent employed by the Federal Art Project, and later interned in camps during World War Two (Goldner 1939–1940). Okubo and Peter Lowe were two of the young, radically minded staff that worked with Rivera on the mural, though only one staff member, Emmy Lou Packard, was actually permitted to paint.¹⁴ Rivera’s populist embrace of indigenous Mexican identity toward a new nationalist consciousness had an undeniable impact on African American painters in San Francisco and nation-wide. Communicating to mass audiences through formal choices such as rounded, flattened figures in dark outline, linear storyline or narrative, and appropriation of pre-Hispanic art of the Americas, Rivera offered stark, if romantic, visions of rural labor. In New York, Charles Alston visited Rivera while he was painting the RCA Building mural at Rockefeller Center in 1933, stating later that he “would go down and talk with Rivera” in French, because Rivera did not have much English and Alston did not speak Spanish (Henderson 1990). Sargent Johnson, another San Francisco-based artist employed by the WPA, had Rivera’s *Pan-American Unity* mural in mind as he created *Athletic Frieze*, a concrete relief for George Washington High School finished in 1942 (Lafalle-Collins 1996).

Though the extent of her immediate relationship with Rivera remains unverified, according to some reports Streat began honing her mural practice at the famed “Pickle Factory” in San Francisco, a former industrial site affiliated with the Golden Gate International Exposition, and which served as a “mural plant” large enough that WPA employees could organize large-scale demonstrations and murals alike (McChesney 1964). Sometime between 1942 and 1944, Streat created small, preparatory oil studies of her own such as *Medicine and Transportation*, now in the collection of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. Divided into two upper and lower quadrants, *Medicine and Transportation* depicts the hard-won materials of progress in jewel-colored, optimistic tones and fat, rounded brushstrokes: a cluster of technological marvels features a steaming locomotive, blimp, airplane, and radio tower, while smaller vignettes below show African American workers toiling in labs and fields, their faceless forms evocatively bent with intense focus. Despite the celebratory tone of the study, their position at the bottom implies their status as the laborers upon whose backs American advancement literally rests (Figure 2). *Medicine and Transportation* was possibly one of the mural studies planned for Streat’s educational project in Chicago, one of three cities where she intended to focus on themes of industrial labor such as “‘the meat packing industry’, ‘the Negro women in industry’, ‘the Negro in the railway industry,’ etc.”¹⁵ In Chicago, she exhibited one mural at the famed Hall Branch Library on the South Side, and in 1944 tied with William Sylvester Carter for first place in a themed mural contest for “The Negro in Professional Life” at the South Side Community Art Center.¹⁶

Continente [The Marriage of the Artistic Expression of the North and of the South of this Continent]); however, there is no other evidence that Streat was a direct assistant to Rivera (Bullington 95).

¹⁴ Anthony W. Lee identifies Asian American and white assistants on *Pan-American Unity*, but no African American assistants (Lee 1999, pp. 250–51n17).

¹⁵ See Helen Clement, “Thelma Johnson Streat at S.F. Museum of Art”, *Oakland Tribune*, March 17, 1946 (TJSP).

¹⁶ Cited in “2 Artists Tie in Art Center Mural Contest” unnamed newspaper clipping, 1944 (OHS).



Figure 2. Thelma Johnson Streat, study for mural, *Medicine and Transportation*, tempera and oil paint on board, 1942–1944. 15 7/16 in. × 15 11/16 in. Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Courtesy of The Johnson Collection.

While clearly dedicated to uplifting black labor, *Medicine and Transportation* departs from the muralism of Streat's peers, many of whom heralded black claims to national belonging, and celebrated black working-class labor on a massive scale. As Stacy I. Morgan has pointed out, both "militant rebellion and black institution building" were equally important in the broader cultural struggle for civil rights at mid-century (Morgan 2004, p. 87). However, the pared-down geometric forms, attention to surface, and intense flatness of Streat's paintings departed from these efforts. Unlike the murals of Hale Woodruff, for example, *Medicine and Transportation* does not illustrate narrative details of grand episodes in African American history; nor does the study retain the illusionistic precision to medical equipment and staff found in another mural dedicated to science, Charles Alston's 1940 *Modern Medicine*. Created with a pendant mural called *Magic in Medicine* for Harlem Hospital, Alston's *Modern Medicine* depicted the shift to technological advancement and science from traditional forms of healing represented in the opposite-facing mural. An enormous microscope symbolizes "progress", but also works as a formal device separating the bottom half—a composite of modern doctors and nurses in the laboratory, performing surgery, and in the midst of heated conversation—from the top half dominated by the likeness of Hippocrates, Greek father of medicine.¹⁷

Alston initially exhibited a color study of one panel, and a full-sized oil on canvas detail of the second panel in the Museum of Modern Art's 1936 exhibition *New Horizons in American Art*, an early example of the museum's commitment to socially engaged forms of modernism, and in this instance a

¹⁷ In their thoroughgoing article on the Harlem Hospital murals, Diana L. Linden and Harry Greene identify this figure alternatively as Aesculapius, the Ancient Roman god of medicine (Linden and Greene 2001, p. 405).

direct linkage between modern art institutions and the WPA.¹⁸ Alston, Woodruff, Charles White, and Elizabeth Catlett created murals as a regular and familiar part of social realist programs, but in addition to large-scale paintings, they made sculptures, prints, illustrations for Communist journals such as *Freedomways*, and drawings in ranges of ink, pencil, and charcoal. While these artists experimented with ever broader means of reaching and dignifying the black working-class through wide-ranging mediums, they rarely blended mediums or sought to use the formal power of one medium to shift the effect of another, as Streat began to do.

In contrast to Alston's meticulously rendered portrait of medical modernity, the generic character of Streat's study results in an emphasis on her gestural, expressionistic brushwork. Thus, even as she was planning a mural program in Chicago with the explicit intention of reaching young people, Streat began to shift to non-narrative, non-linear forms in both painting and her newly embraced realm of dance.¹⁹ If murals depend on a scalar model of storytelling, compressing narratives into spatial arrangements that deliver the most heightened emotional impact possible, their messages can nevertheless only be conveyed through static pictures. Moving ever closer to abstraction, Streat's imaginative formal tactics might be seen as akin to what, in Surrealist contexts, has been called the "marvelous", enabling her to move past insistent romantic typologies of black folklore, and exceed social realist representations of Western industry, even if this latter at times also registered ambivalence toward industrial progress.²⁰

It is possible that Streat used performance initially to bring attention to her murals. She never received formal training in modern dance, but rather saw dance as a direct outgrowth of her painting practice. The *Chicago Defender* reported in July 1945 that Streat was presenting "new creative dances" at photographer Alda Jourdan's studios in Portland, Oregon, a sponsored event meant as a benefit for the larger, tri-city murals project. The article also stated that Streat would discuss the project live on Portland's KEX radio station.²¹ Yet soon she would leave murals behind, devoting her practice nearly full-time to formal concert dance. On 16 September 1945, Streat performed a program of four short pieces at Chicago's Kimball Theater. These included two dances set to Negro spirituals, sung by an unaccompanied vocalist, a dance set to Johannes Brahms's lullaby "Cradle Song", and a dance performed to a poem called "The Negro Speaks of Faith", written and read by the artist's sister, Juanita Johnson. Taken together, the song selection evidences the affective promise of music to re-route insidious constructions of blackness in Euro-American culture. In other words, spirituals conveyed the humanity and value of black subjectivity through the aegis of a "pure" folk authenticity, a tradition that had been instituted in the late nineteenth century by traveling groups such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers,²² and revived for the concert stage in the 1930s by performers such as Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, and Paul Robeson.

In New Negro circles, a generation prior to Streat, aesthetics were seen as a guarantor of humanity by prominent philosophers such as Alain Locke: the ability to produce high art and culture had the potential to legitimate black Americans as equal contributors to Western civilization. The Jubilee Singers began performing in order to fundraise for their home institution of Fisk University, whose liberal arts program was less supported than the industrial-professional universities such as Hampton and Tuskegee (Reagon 2001). A perennial favorite of white audiences, the ensemble blended the

¹⁸ *New Horizons in American Art* was dedicated to works done under the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration led by Holger Cahill. It was around this time that the circulation and reception of Mexican muralists were also making their way through U.S. exhibition circuits, as Anna Indych-Lopez has written. While Mexican murals were less emphasized in the 1940 exhibition *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, they were front and center in Rivera's 1931 solo exhibition for which he created eight portable frescoes (Indych-Lopez 2009).

¹⁹ Most of the newspaper articles and reviews of Streat's performances put 1945 as the earliest performance; Helen Clement dates the first performance to June of 1945. See Clement, "Thelma Johnson Streat at S.F. Museum of Art" (TJSP).

²⁰ For André Breton's notion of the "marvelous", see (Breton [1924] 1972, pp. 1–48). See also (Kelley 2002, pp. 164–70).

²¹ "Frisco Artist in New Role", *Chicago Defender*, July 21, 1945, p. 17.

²² Daphne Brooks describes white fascination with the Jubilee Singers in the transcultural "'contact zone' of black postbellum performance", which contributed to their status as the first black "cross-over" musical act (Brooks 2007, pp. 296–97).

lyrics, timbre, and cadence of slave songs with the choral harmonies of European musical traditions, ultimately creating an emotional power that seemed nearly to approximate divine message.

Locke acknowledged the “serious and proper social interpretation” bestowed upon spirituals in W.E.B. Du Bois’s framework of the “sorrow songs”, lauding “as Dr. Du Bois has pointed out, an epic intensity and a tragic profundity of emotional experience” that underlay them (Locke [1925] 1997, p. 200). But Locke also saw the need to break from this reading and trace spirituals back to their secular folk context as a collective, “congregational, not theatrical”, form (Locke [1925] 1997, p. 202). Zora Neale Hurston similarly drew attention to “neo-spirituals” as polished versions of songs found in Southern folk and rural church services, these latter as much rooted in folk cultural thematics as they were laced with melancholy. Writing in the 1934 *Negro: An Anthology*, Hurston declared:

The idea that the whole body of spirituals are ‘sorrow songs’ is ridiculous. They cover a wide range of subjects from a peeve at gossipers to Death and Judgment . . . There never has been a presentation of genuine Negro spirituals to any audience anywhere. What is being sung by the concert artists and glee clubs are the works of Negro composers or adaptors *based on* the spirituals. (Hurston 1934, pp. 359–60)

The “jagged harmony” and “shifting keys and broken time” that constituted folk spirituals for Hurston were not typically what non-black audiences in cities beyond the South experienced; however, I draw attention to this differentiation not to reinforce the putative authenticity of the folk in Hurston’s and Locke’s arguments, but rather to show how Streat’s strangely transmedial creations departed from typical period approaches to the Negro spiritual (Hurston 1934, pp. 360–61). In particular, it is her interrelation between performance and painting that calls into question both Du Bois’s melancholic assessment, and the “neo-spirituals” that, according to Hurston, had become the commercialized bread and butter of the thirties performance circuit. Streat’s “covering” of the concert spirituals popularized by Fisk Jubilee, Robeson, Anderson, and groups such as the Hall Johnson Choir already marks the music’s refraction through multiple sources, deflecting the idea of an immediate authenticity inhering in her own embodied performance.

3. Peculiar Motion: Streat’s Variation on Modern Dance

In addition to spirituals, Streat employed traditional and folk music from cultures across North and Central America for choreographed gestures that reviewers described as mime, pantomime—or, in one particularly memorable neologism, the movements of a “dance-mimist.”²³ These terms are somewhat misleading, as Streat did not create mimetic actions by way of overwrought gestural charade. The subtle curve and swoop of a hand, the angular upward bend of an arm—both captured in publicity photographs of Streat from the period—are not meant to stand in for language, as in the pantomimed actions of early film stars, nor do they translate directly to an emotive inner state. Instead, Streat’s layered motions imparted stillness and restraint, producing a gestural vocabulary that critics struggled to understand. Indeed, critical reception of Streat points toward something more experimental than what was known and accepted as modern dance or “Negro dance”, edging closer to what we now know as “performance art”—though this term and its attendant discourses would not exist until the 1970s.

By the 1940s, modern dance had departed radically from the linear rigidity, technical marvel, and illusionistic weightlessness of classical ballet. Shifting away from the artificiality of balletic convention, movement was stripped down to bare templates, emphasizing the weight, mass, and gravity of bodies themselves. Dancers eschewed theatrical spectacle and elaborate costuming for bare feet and loose clothing, while choreographers increasingly distanced external expression from signifying interior emotion (Foulkes 2002). It was in the 1940s as well that African American modern dancers such as

²³ See for instance: “Dancer Appears at Recital at Exhibition of Paintings”, *The Oregonian*. October 15. 1950 (TJSP); “Couple to Give Programs for School Children.” *Oakland Tribune*. April 7. 1946 (TJSP); and “Negro Dance Mime Will Give Program on Campus Sunday.” *Reed College Quest* 40 (1951), p. 1.

Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus gained visibility due to the precedents of Hemsley Winfield, Edna Guy, and Asadata Dafora in the previous decade, and the leftist platforms that remained to be filled after the end of the Federal Theatre Project (Perpener 2001, p. 129; Manning 2004, p. 119). The early 1940s initiated a crucial turning point for the entangling of Negro dance and modern dance, although they are seldom historicized as such (Manning 2004).

Dunham and Primus synthesized modern dance vocabularies with African and Caribbean ritual dance: both had backgrounds in anthropological fieldwork that further validated their experiments in the eyes of critics. Each blended their academic study with the communicative promise of dance. Dunham's troupe pioneered a carefully constructed, physically rigorous choreography that drew on a transcultural range of material. Initially, Dunham studied Javanese, Balinese, and Spanish dance, though these were taught not from direct study of these regions but through teachers in the States (Das 2017). In 1935–1936, she received a Rosenwald Grant to travel for ten months in the Caribbean, where she researched ceremonial dances from Jamaica, Martinique, Trinidad, and Haiti. Her scholarly work on Haitian Vodou ceremonies especially informed her dances, though reviewers and critics had difficulty untangling what was “real” or anthropologically derived from what Dunham invented—a slippage that she embraced in order to most effectively convey a sense of diasporic consciousness.

Hurston also pressed at disciplinary boundaries, writing ethnographic accounts of folklore in the U.S. South and Haiti that were deemed too stylized and “aesthetic” to count as empirical, ethnological scholarship along the lines of her mentor, anthropologist Franz Boas.²⁴ And for her part, Primus declared “With anthropology I could gain the facts about which I danced—the facts and not just the feelings” (Griffin 2013, p. 70).²⁵ Yet each woman melded the cultural residue of ethnographic research with figments of their aesthetic imaginary. The deeper each of these dancers delved into ethnographic data through fieldwork, the harder it became to discern what true knowledge might entail, as their research became filtered through artistic invention and modification of “primitive” tropes. Dunham purportedly owned a painting of Streat's in her personal collection, and the two are said to have met.²⁶ In a 1941 letter from no less than Langston Hughes to Streat's sister Juanita, he wrote: “Katherine Dunham and several of her dancers were recently guests here. She spoke of hoping to meet your sister yesterday in San Francisco. I hope that came to pass.”²⁷

However, unlike the work of her peers, the difficulty in categorizing Streat is compounded by the lack of extant documentation, though the entwined roles of researcher, educator, and performer similarly constituted her output. My descriptions of Streat's movements have been constructed from newspaper reviews, performance programs, and photographs.²⁸ The program for the 1945 Kimball Theater show in Chicago, for instance, describes Streat as alternating between “functional” and “stylized” gestures: “In functional movement, one arm illustrates, relates, or weaves a spell, the other holds the balance opposing or harmonizing with it. (As in the interpretation of Brahm's Cradle Song.) The stylized gestures are broader and interpret general emotional reactions to living experiences.”²⁹ In its review, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported “... it is a misnomer to describe her as a dancer. Dancing involves movement, while Miss Streat's interpretative scheme consists for the most part of a stationary

²⁴ For a masterful analysis of Hurston's genre transgressions, see (Cotera 2008).

²⁵ Primus received a doctorate in anthropology in 1978 from New York University, after completing some coursework at Columbia, where she enrolled in 1945. Dunham began working towards a Masters in anthropology at University of Chicago with Robert Redfield though never completed it, and corresponded with Melville Herskovits at Northwestern as part of her Julius Rosenwald Fund grant (Griffin 2013; Das 2017).

²⁶ Both points have yet to be corroborated, however (Bullington 2005).

²⁷ Langston Hughes, Letter to Juanita Johnson, October 13, 1941 (OHS).

²⁸ While film recordings of Streat's performances are said to exist, the archive has yet to reveal them. At least one newspaper article notes the existence of film recordings made of Streat's performance at the San Francisco Museum of Art by actor Burgess Meredith and his production company New World Studio. See “Artist-Dancer, Thelma Streat, To Appear Here”, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, February 7, 1948 (OHS).

²⁹ *A Recital of Interpretive Rhythms* Program. Chicago: Kimball Theater. September 16, 1945 (OHS).

swaying, punctuated by bending of the upper body and embellished with an elaborate system of hand and arm gestures.”³⁰

This description hits on a peculiar condition of Streat’s work: while designed for concert venues and theaters, her dances were tight and highly controlled in their range of motion, never straying far from the unitary form of her torso. Indeed, Streat appeared to employ the balance of her body’s weight, carefully creating harmonious, symmetrical poses that imbued movement with the obdurate, two-dimensional surfaces of painting. In one photograph, her head is cocked backwards, and knees bent. Though both arms are bent at right angles, her right palm faces behind her, while the left faces in front of her (Figure 3). The upward tilt of her face calls to mind the vertical thrust of the 1941 *Rabbit Man*, conveying a stillness that nonetheless exceeds the fixity of the painting.



Figure 3. Thelma Johnson Streat, photographer unknown. Thelma Johnson Streat Dance Clipping File, Special Collections, Jerome L. Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Courtesy of The Johnson Collection.

Yet the ways in which performance embodied painting in the 1940s have gone largely unrecognized. The trajectory from abstract painting into real space, and the legibility of painting *as* performative has been well traced through Harold Rosenberg’s and Allan Kaprow’s later reception of Jackson Pollock in 1952 and 1958, respectively. For Rosenberg, the brushstrokes that ended up on the canvas were less crucial than the action that created them: as “not a picture but an event”, which marked the painter’s near-existential act of pouring out the self (Rosenberg 1952, p. 22). Kaprow would modify this argument to characterize Pollock’s dripped marks as lateral extensions into three-dimensional space. Viewed as the endpoint of painting, the drip paintings could lead to no possible way forward

³⁰ Albert Goldberg, “Kimball Hall Opens Season with Recital by Thelma J. Streat”, *Chicago Daily Tribune*. September 17, 1945, p. 16.

in the conventions of two-dimensionality, yet opened up movement from paint to bodies, found materials, and everyday objects (Kaprow 2003). In the later moment in which Kaprow was writing, artists cultivating performance negotiated the limit conditions of painting as medium, opening up its logic to three dimensions. This transgression, part of a turn to intermedia existence *between* mediums, fostered the potential for the radically illegible, resulting in undecidable objects which intentionally refused categorization according to the accepted inherent qualities of a given medium.

Less discussed are those earlier practices that accept the traditional separation of genres but attempt to invigorate one by means of the other's structural logic. As Streat later told a newspaper reporter, "I felt a great urge for movement...that I could do more with painting if I could say something with the body."³¹ As such, Streat's motions shifted away from expectations of choreography as necessarily seamless, flowing, or bound to kinesthetics. "Performance" or "movement" as generic terms perhaps more effectively acknowledge the staged, posed quality of Streat's works, instead of subsuming them into the traditional range of bodily motion implied by "dance." Though choreographers such as Martha Graham had already begun to differentiate between gesture and dance, producing the former as framed, isolated motions, Streat and peers like Pearl Primus imbued gesture with meaning derived from painting and sculpture. Farah Jasmine Griffin points out that the New Dance Group, founded in 1932 and the only racially integrated dance studio in New York, "introduced Primus to African sculpture, from which the young dancer learned postures and angles. From photographs and collections of African art housed throughout the city, she made note of bodies leaning forward in relaxed stances, the connection of the feet to the earth, and the use of the free and relaxed hand" (Griffin 2013, p. 38). While black artists' use of African sculpture had been widely encouraged by proponents such as Alain Locke, in this context, African art may have also ennobled Negro dance, which was still frequently seen as not belonging to the realm of formal concert dance. When black dancers ventured outside material seen as "exotic" or lowbrow, they were seen as interlopers, as derivative of an already existing modern dance tradition.

Further, the exoticizing of black expressivity had long been associated with dance, tied to what André Lepecki calls "the spectacle of mobility", or the physical effort, toil, and sweat so often depicted in racialized fantasies of black people as innate, "natural" performers (Lepecki 2006, p. 58). If there is a physicality or fleshliness to black expression, it is not essential or natural but rooted in the historical status of dance and music as material commodities inextricably connected to the commodification of the people who invented it; in other words, its fostering under the extreme and violent conditions of chattel slavery and its historical repercussions (Radano 2013). By the 1940s, however, it had become unfashionable to mobilize what Susan Manning memorably calls "metaphorical minstrelsy"—or the enactment of non-western or indigenous American cultural practice through white modernist appropriation. Instead modern dance, particularly vis-à-vis Martha Graham, embraced an abstraction divorced from bodily identification. Bodies perceived as culturally "other" needed to be physically present onstage in order to claim authenticity of movement. As Manning writes, "After 1940 the culturally marked body became the province of Negro dance, as modern dance deployed the newly privileged unmarked body" (Manning 2004, p. 118).

Streat's African and Cherokee heritage was consistently commodified to promote her authenticity in performance, even as her international travels comprised the thematic heart of her practice. One flier announced that Streat's work was where "PRIMAL RITUAL becomes CONTEMPORARY THEATRE", while a later brochure promoting a performance at the Sartu Theatre in Hollywood would proclaim her "the most sensational Afro-Indian dance personality of our generation" and a "great primitivist, ritualistic dancer."³² Her paintings were often marketed similarly: an exhibition at San Francisco's Vera Jones Bright Gallery announced a show by Streat as "An Exhibition of Negroid Primitive Designs

³¹ Wilma Morrison, "Portland Interpretive Dancer Wins World Acclaim, Professes She Prefers School Work to Club Glitter", *The Oregonian*, September 4, 1951 (TJSP).

³² Performance Program, Sartu Theater, Los Angeles. December 9, 1951 (OHS).

by Thelma Johnson Streat.” Despite being common parlance of the moment, these terms worked to specifically market and sell Streat under the auspices of racial spectacle.

Perhaps, then, Streat’s movements intentionally diverged from the overt expressivity expected of black performance—whether eroticized black vernacular dance or the spectacular performance of “imperial subjecthood” in the Pacific, which codified racial stereotype through acts in burlesque, chorus lines, cabarets, and nightclubs (Brown 2008, p. 96). Her dancerly interlocation with painting might be seen to activate new receptions of black performance, in that the stillness gleaned from painting disrupted desires for authentic black cultural expression, while invigorating the stasis of her two-dimensional art. Critics were favorable toward Streat’s supposed genuineness of feeling—but did not know what to make of this upright formal containment and self-possession. In *Dance Magazine*, one critic wrote: “Hand gestures predominate. Though not uninteresting, there is a tendency to monotony in the limited range of movement.”³³ Still others noted the “plastic beauty” and quiet restraint of her gestures and facial expressions—forms of stillness that must be seen as active holding rather than passive non-movement.³⁴ After all, stillness is never truly still, as muscle, tissue, and sinew vibrate with the largely unseen effort of holding a single position (Lepecki 2000).

As theater scholar Harvey Young writes, performed stillness or pause ruptures the “experiential overlaps” produced by similar phenomenological experiences of blackness that stem from repeated emphasis on race over other factors of identification. Young posits that despite vast intersectional differences, certain spectacular circumstances—such as heightened public surveillance, policing, discrimination, or forced migration—delineate the bounds of lived, embodied blackness. Though these experiences are not the same for everyone of African descent by any means, Young argues that connections are established through similar moments of “racial (mis)recognition” (Young 2010). Given the Klan threats to Streat in the past, it is entirely plausible that her “still” moves were carried over from painting to hold emotional weight, particularly as the civil rights movement began to gain more ground and visibility. As she told the *San Francisco Examiner* in 1952:

If ever there was a time when every race needs desperately to try to understand each other and to realize that—however different their cultures—their hopes and human needs, their pride and aspirations are the same, that time is now.³⁵

4. A New Humanist Frequency

In the summer of 1945, Streat presented a work called *Dance of Freedom* in the galleries of the Museum of Modern Art, part of a series programmed by the museum’s now-defunct department of Dance and Theater Design. A reporter for *The Oregonian* recounted that Streat “performed before one of her own large paintings, using the painting as a part of the forms expressed in her dance. No music was heard . . . a commentator’s voice was heard as she danced.”³⁶ The program followed an exhibition dedicated to lighting and costume designer Robert Edmond Jones, which inaugurated a small set of galleries in the auditorium that MoMA used for a continuous, rotating display of visual material related to theater and ballet. In its press release, the museum noted:

In assigning permanent gallery space to the Department of Dance and Theatre Design, the Museum indicates its significant interest in the theatre arts, and thus assures the public of a comprehensive policy which extends into every field of contemporary artistic activity. The theatre gallery is not dedicated to a rigid program or set principles. An informal meeting

³³ Unpaginated notice in *Dance Magazine*, November 1945. (NYPL).

³⁴ See Marcel Frere, “Ce Soir”, included in *The Art of Thelma Johnson Streat: American Artist* brochure (NYPL).

³⁵ Marion McEniry, “Thelma Streat Back from Triumphs; Noted Artist Returns to S.F.”, *San Francisco Examiner*, November 23, 1952, p. 5 (OHS).

³⁶ Jones, “Thelma Streat Comes Home”, p. 5.

place for the scenic artists and spectators, it is organized to keep a continuous pictorial record, to parallel the trends and achievements of the living stage.³⁷

As an interdisciplinary artist in the museum's collection, Streat was a logical choice for MoMA to show their commitment to performing artists at this time, and their willingness early on to let artists mingle with the objects. Though *Rabbit Man* did not appear to be incorporated into her performance, Streat's version of abstraction adhered to MoMA's vision of abstraction that squeezed between the cracks of Alfred Barr's strict teleology. In the 1930s–1940s alone, the museum would devote exhibitions not only to ballet and modern dance, but to precolonial Mexican, African, and Native American art: for instance, *African Negro Art* (1935), *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art* (1940), and *Indian Art of the United States* (1941). Not only was it acceptable to view modernist abstraction alongside pre-modern and non-western art forms, but MoMA encouraged the idea that abstraction was a timeless phenomenon that transcended geographies, time periods, and cultures.

Even so, the ethos of avant-garde abstraction linked universalism, paradoxically, to a heroic individuality assumed as an unquestioned white, Western male subjecthood.³⁸ When white, male Abstract Expressionist painters drew upon African and Native North American forms, as has been documented in depth by both Ann Eden Gibson and Michael Leja, their paintings were received as a general Western anxiety over the cosmic fate of the human—a tragic, endangered figure at mid-century, and one implicitly coded male and white—despite the fact that so-called “primitive” forms used in early New York School paintings were archetypes emptied of contextual specificity, and often mobilized toward American aesthetic origin narratives. By contrast, when Streat, Woodruff, Alston, and other black painters drew upon similar forms, it was seen to corroborate an inherent racial essence—as Leja has succinctly described it, “their work was not primitivizing, it was *primitive*” (Leja 1993, p. 101).

Norman Lewis is a pertinent example of how black artists in and around the New York School aspired to a universalist reading of abstraction. The prerogative to nonrepresentational painting for Lewis opposed, on the one hand, white institutional apparatuses that expected legibly “black” thematics; and on the other hand, the predominant black artistic establishment's own claims to cultural continuity—what Alain Locke had some twenty years earlier called “ancestralism”—by way of African sculpture and artifacts. Lewis saw his paintings within the purview of a detached, disembodied gaze; he saw himself and his work as another starting point for the transcendent potential of form. However, his coopting of universal human subjecthood, as some have argued, evaded him (Gibson 1998; Stewart 2015). His biography and presumed legibility as a black man would come to overshadow reception of his work, establishing it as marked rather than universal—as though these are poles that are mutually exclusive and cannot coincide.

Streat also aspired to a humanism that was universal, though not *neutral*. Lewis used abstraction to evade the modes of inscription that immediately signified not only the social world, but racial specificity or radical particularity of personhood. Streat, on the other hand, never conceived her mode of abstraction apart from the concrete ground of subjectivity. One way she may have achieved this was performing before paintings. An undated photograph depicts her at what is most likely the 1945 Albany Institute of History and Art exhibition *The Negro Artist Comes of Age*, organized by Alain Locke. Though she exhibited her own gouache painting called *Mother and Baby in Desert*, Streat is shown cross-legged before a canvas whose radiating bands of light against a sharply angled silhouette form the telltale characteristics of an Aaron Douglas work. This was likely Douglas's mural *The Negro Through the Ages*, loaned to the exhibition by his home institution, Fisk University. Hair bound in a kerchief, her wide skirts smoothed over her knees, Streat closes her eyes and raises her arms, palms pressed out toward the viewer (Figure 4). For Streat, the coextensive dialogue between painting and

³⁷ “Museum of Modern Art Opens Theatre and Ballet Design Gallery”, Press Release, April 9, 1945. Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.

³⁸ Ann Eden Gibson proposes that we see women working in the various idioms of Abstract Expressionism as claiming a “universality of difference”, rather than difference as at odds with the universal (Gibson 1995, p. 110).

dance appeared to refuse the closure of meaning signified by recognizable referents. She does not seem to mimic the figure in the image, but rather, channel its frequency. We might even suggest that she served as a medium *between* two mediums—painting and performance. Such a practice perhaps enabled a version of “Human” that diverged from the rational, self-conceived “ethnaclass” of “Man” through the affective vitality generated by gesture (Wynter 2003, p. 293).



Figure 4. Thelma Johnson Streat, photographer unknown. Thelma Johnson Streat Dance Clipping File, Special Collections, Jerome L. Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Courtesy of The Johnson Collection.

It is unclear whether other museum performances—such as Streat’s showing at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1946—included immediate dialogue with paintings. The San Francisco performance nearly did not occur: letters from the museum’s director, Grace McCann Morley, show that there were not enough funds to cover Streat’s initial estimate for the costs of her performance, which had originally been envisioned to include “narrators, special lights, etc.”³⁹ However, through dual sponsorship with the San Francisco Dance League and through Streat’s own fundraising efforts, the museum was finally able to present her on March 20, 1946, describing the performance as “a program of interpretations to the accompaniment of spirituals and original poetry on Negro themes.” This program was divided into thirds, presenting first spirituals popularized by the Hall Johnson Choir followed by “The Negro Speaks of Faith”, the poem narrated by Streat’s sister Juanita. After an intermission, Streat performed to “Interpretations from Music of Mexico”, including a Yaqui Mexican indigenous song and the traditional Mexican number “La Paloma Azul”, and then two African American spirituals: “Humble Yo Self, De Bell Done Ring”, and “Ain’t Gonna Study War No More.”⁴⁰

³⁹ Grace McCann Morley, Letter to Thelma Johnson Streat. February 21, 1946. Box 70, Folder 16 (SFMMAA).

⁴⁰ “Interpretations Based on Negro Themes”, Program for Thelma Johnson Streat, presented jointly by The San Francisco Museum of Art and The San Francisco Dance League, March 20, 1946 (SFMMAA).

The museum also secured loans from collectors of Streat's paintings in order to exhibit them—this time, it seems, in a small, adjacent gallery display rather than directly behind or near her. In a stock letter to lenders, Morley wrote: "Her medium of expression is related to her own work in painting and drawing, more closely allied to graphic art in her own mind than to dance, though there is something of dance, or perhaps the source material of dance in it."⁴¹ If the *Medicine and Transportation* mural study revealed the limitations of painting's stillness, rigidity, and temporal distancing, in performance these qualities activated something different. The San Francisco program appeared to concur with this assessment, noting that "[o]ut of [mural painting] has grown a conviction of the strong communicative power of movement."⁴² This "communicative" relay between animacy and restraint maps across heterogenous cultural spaces, in part by engaging Native cultures across Northwest and Central America. Streat's transmedial works initiated new kinetic frequencies, particularly when read through her desire for interracial, intercultural belonging.

5. Travels through Native North and Central Americas

In the summer of 1946, Streat launched extended research into Haida and Squamish cultures on the Pacific Northwest coast, home to a diverse range of Native peoples from Alaska down through southern Oregon. A reporter for the *Vancouver Sun* detailed Streat's intention to "compare her Negro expressionist dances with the ceremonial movements of the Squamish tribe, as manifested by Chief Khahtsahlano."⁴³ Also known as Xats'alanexw and August Jack, Khahtsahlano was considered a primary oral historian and gatekeeper of Squamish culture, educating Native and non-Native audiences alike on Squamish sovereignty and claims to land that had been extracted and renamed Vancouver.⁴⁴ Traditional Squamish territory in Lower Mainland British Columbia covers 6732 km, starting from Howe Sound at the northwest and covering the inlets False Creek and Burrard Inlet, and English Bay.⁴⁵ These land claims overlapped with two other Salishan groups in the region, the Tslil-waututh and Musqueam (Xwméthkwiyem). Prior to the first European contact—the Spanish in 1774 and the British in 1778—the Squamish fostered peaceful relations with these neighboring nations through intermarriage, potlatch, and trade.

Beginning in 1932, Khahtsahlano participated in a series of interviews with the city's archivist, J.S. Matthews. Transcribed and published in 1955, the interviews recorded his remembrances going back to 1881, five years before the naming of "Vancouver." Khahtsahlano also cultivated close friendships with local figures such as community leader and activist Maisie Hurley. He carved his own Squamish masks, at least one of which, a *sxwayxwii*, he gifted to Hurley, but he also owned three ceremonial masks that had belonged to his great-grandfather, Old Chief Khahtsahlano, his grandfather, Chief Khahtsahlano, and his father Khay-Tulk.⁴⁶ The two older masks he showed for the first time in 1942, ultimately agreeing to publish photographs of them in Matthews's book (Matthews 1955, pp. 163–65).

To Streat, who was accompanied by a reporter and a photographer, Khahtsahlano taught ceremonial dance and the history of the Squamish masks in his possession. According to the report in the *Vancouver Sun*, Streat likely viewed the mask of the ancestor Old Chief Khahtsahlano. While many in the Squamish community hold that it is inappropriate to show the masks to anyone at all or to put them on public view, particularly if they have been danced or used in ceremonial cleansing, this protective status over communal knowledge and spirituality ultimately comes down to the personal

⁴¹ Grace McCann Morley, Undated loan letter to lenders. Box 70, Folder 16 (SFMMAA).

⁴² "Interpretations Based on Negro Themes", Program for Thelma Johnson Streat, presented jointly by The San Francisco Museum of Art and The San Francisco Dance League, March 20, 1946 (SFMMAA).

⁴³ Bill Rose, "Brilliant Negro Artist is Here to Study Indian Lore", *Vancouver Sun*. August 16, 1946, p. 15.

⁴⁴ The name "Khahtsahlano" was not used by the Native community but was recorded by deed poll in Victoria before the "Change of Name Act" was passed; thus it was the name commonly referenced in the press (Matthews 1955).

⁴⁵ Squamish Nation Online, "Our Land", 2013. Available online: <https://www.squamish.net/about-us/our-land/> (accessed on 27 November 2019).

⁴⁶ The mask now resides in the North Vancouver Museum and Archives (Fortney 2010, p. 85).

choice of family members.⁴⁷ Therefore, it seems that Khahtsahlano's exposure of the mask was entirely his prerogative, and plausible given that he had already shown it to J.S. Matthews. Whether personal generosity, promotion of Native culture, or transcultural pedagogical investment, Khahtsahlano's motivations resonate with Streat's own desire to elevate African American cultural forms to a new humanism through innovative relay between gesture and graphic arts. In their outreach across audiences, including Native and African American audiences, both Khahtsahlano and Streat reveal a complex mobility between geographic emplacement and cultural transmission in the context of settler colonialism.

While for Native residents "place" connotes an ancient ancestral rootedness in the land in spite of forced removal, the black diaspora bears very different relations to land based on the conditions of forced and voluntary migration, particularly in slavery's mandated tethering to land. At the same time, indigeneity and blackness, as opposed to diaspora, are of course not necessarily mutually exclusive (Miles 2005). Streat, like Hurston, Dunham, and Primus more or less at the exact same moment, explored diasporic belief systems through transmedial formal experiments, implying the mobility that tactics fostered in and through diaspora required. Such physical mobility refused the sociological tendency to lock black subjectivity into past histories of enslavement and land-based servitude, instead encouraging travel as bound up with self-knowledge and self-discovery as much as educational work. At mid-century, the content-gathering and staging of performance enabled Streat's literal spatial movement, which in turn informed her efforts to delineate new "territories" through gesture, and even across mediums.

Yet while Hurston, Dunham and Primus had all secured Julius Rosenwald fellowships to fund their travels, Streat's research into folklore and indigenous cultures appeared to stem solely from the support of local arts patrons, galleries, and social clubs. Her freely chosen, far-flung "cartographies" in the Americas—across Oregon, California, Chicago, New York, Vancouver, Hawai'i and Mexico—marked a rare and unique pathway for an African American woman in the still racially segregated 1940s. Certainly, her relative ease of access through bourgeois, even aristocratic circles—in one newspaper interview, she details performing for Queen Elizabeth at Buckingham Palace—sets up a disproportionate relation between her individual intentions and the cultural, collective work created by the artists she studied.⁴⁸ In this sense, despite Streat's genuine desire for interracial tolerance, the hierarchical dynamics of power that mark the representer versus the represented, do not simply dissipate based on racial identification alone. As Stephanie Batiste puts it: "the structure of othering persisted in liberal, humanizing efforts, both black and white, to research and collect cultural information about different(iated) peoples", a situation complexified when talking about black anthropologists' "antiracist vindicationism, participatory methodology, and international diaspora" (Batiste 2012, p. 171).

On the one hand, it would be reductive to see Streat's work on and off stage as solely appropriative tokens of liberal goodwill; on the other, it is equally incorrect to understand her use of indigenous culture as more authentic by virtue of being an African American woman with Cherokee heritage. Given that the forties cultural zeitgeist had shifted the "primitive" object of choice from African to Native, Streat's ethnographic approach does not negate the unevenly distributed power dynamics of cultural borrowing, even in well-intentioned empathy and multiculturalist effort. She was a product of historical discourses: following the field-altering anthropological research of Claude Levi-Strauss and Franz Boas, in 1941 MoMA mounted *Indian Art of the United States*, and September 1946 saw Barnett Newman organize *Native Northwest Coast Art*, the inaugural exhibition at Betty Parsons Gallery. Yet if she was hardly alone in pursuing Native Northwest Coast art forms and cultures in the 1940s–50s, Streat's expansive vision of the human was rooted in cultural understanding over formal equivalence:

⁴⁷ Fortney notes a recent episode in which Squamish community members lobbied the North Vancouver Museum and Archives to remove the mask that Khahtsahlano carved and gifted to Maisie Hurley, which had been on view (Fortney 2010, pp. 86–87).

⁴⁸ McEniry, "Thelma Streat Back from Triumphs", 5 (OHS).

“That is why I dance the spirituals of my people”, she told the *San Francisco Examiner*, “that is why I do ancient Indian ceremonial dances. And that is why I especially like to dance before children. Hope for racial understanding begins with them.”⁴⁹

Some semblance of Streat’s utopic outlook toward art’s potential for cultural tolerance is indeed evident in her work with children. She and her husband opened a school in Honolulu called “Children’s City”, intended to teach global folklore and art; in 1956, they broke ground on Salt Spring Island in British Columbia to start another branch of the school, whose program would participate in cultural exchange with the Hawai’i “Children’s City.” However, five years before the attempt to open the Canadian school, Streat returned to British Columbia. She again visited Khatsalano with three paintings to formally gift, and demonstrated for him an assortment of folk dances learned in Honolulu, Mexico, and Haiti.⁵⁰ In this spirit of a repeated, reciprocal cultural transmission, spatial movement can be rethought as charting knowledge that does not “represent” identity as a fixed and stable phenomenon, but exists through circulation. As McKittrick reminds us, to think about place in this way is not to de-spatialize or to be root-less, but to make geography itself less tied to location, and instead definable through black and Native experiences of place (McKittrick 2006). Consequently, Streat’s palimpsestic attention to non-European art and music structured her conscious *use* of primitivist discourse, troubling the idea of primitivism as wholly one-sided—or even as entirely negative.⁵¹ Her restrained performance techniques resonated across different cultural frequencies but stopped short of producing, enacting, or fetishizing colonial identities for mass audience allure, though this did not stop writers and reviewers from lauding her work as realistic representations of “primitive” cultures.

There is no extant information on whether Streat researched Yaqui Mexican indigenous culture in person, though at least one newspaper article cites her as having lived and studied “with Indians in Mexico”, particularly in Sonora.⁵² The frequent appearance of Yaqui music in her performances shows another example of how, for Streat, black diasporic mobility was crucial to loosening performance stereotypes and educational aesthetics. Though the well-known *Folkways* record “Yaqui Dances: The Pascola Music of the Yaqui Indians of Northern Mexico” was not released until 1957, U.S.-based ethnomusicologists had already begun to publish on the music as early as 1932, as in Frances Densmore’s *Yuman and Yaqui Music*. There is some evidence to support that Yaqui music accompanied the more general, romanticized Mexican folkloric signifiers circulating in the United States at this time. Mexican indigenous culture had already been disseminated through modern art exhibitions across the country such as MoMA’s 1940 *Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art*, as well as through the self-fashioning and art collecting of Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo, and Rivera’s outsize presence in American muralism.

The *Twenty Centuries* exhibition was supplemented by live concerts of traditional Mexican music over several dates in May 1940, with a program that included an arrangement of “La Paloma Azul” by Carlos Chávez, as well as a program of Yaqui music (Chávez 1940). Though it is plausible that Streat may have been in New York at the time to hear the concerts, she was based between Chicago and the Bay Area in the early forties. The San Francisco Museum of Art was already exhibiting Rivera in 1935, however, thus opening up more possibilities for the spread of Mexican folk and indigenous music in modernist settings. With Yaqui music a foundational part of her music selection, Streat sought to convey a humanism that honored cultural particularity across the Pacific. This approach, however, began to edge into the more conventionally mimetic later in Streat’s performances, though still with striking attention to transmediality.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ See May Ebbitt, “Hypnosis Aids Artist in Work”, *The Montreal Standard*, August 18, 1951 (OHS).

⁵¹ For more on black women’s roles in the orientaling function of revues and popular dance, see (Brown 2008; Batiste 2012).

⁵² See citation in “Negro Dance Mime Will Give Program on Campus Sunday.” *Reed College Quest* 1951, p. 1.

6. Enlivening and Empathy

In a 1951 performance at Los Angeles's Sartu Theater, Streat's program announced the first section comprised of "Aztec Dance", "Yaqui Dance", and "Haidah Dance." The first act was described as "An Aztec statue come to life", and the second as "The dancer recreates the spirit that lives in a totem pole." In the second section, "African Heritage", Juanita's poem is described as "a vitalization in space of the history of the American Negro and his faith."⁵³ The program, itself a striking aesthetic document, also included images of Streat's paintings at the bottom of the first page, as though to make the relay between mediums clear (Figure 5).

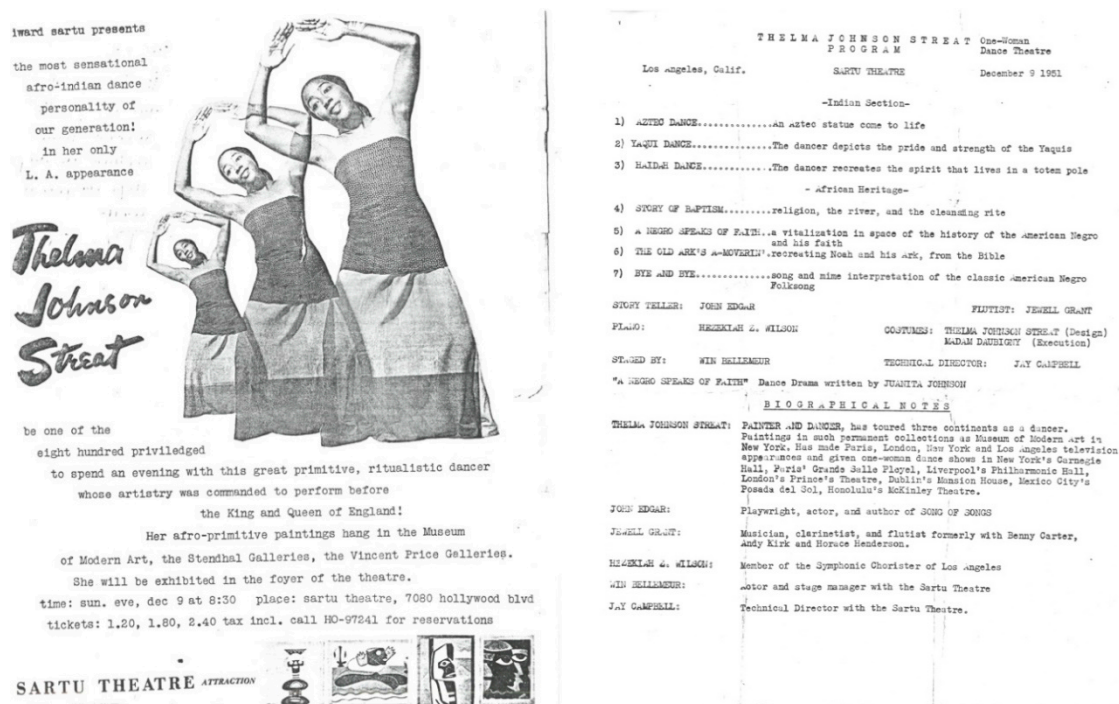


Figure 5. Poster and program for Thelma Johnson Streat at the Sartu Theater, Los Angeles, 9 December 1951 (OHS). Courtesy of The Johnson Collection.

Streat's movement vocabulary gave life to—or to use her word, provided a "vitalization" of—the objects as living enactments of their use function, without demonstrating their actual use. In other words, instead of using the objecthood of the Aztec statue or the Haida totem pole as mute, passive source material for a didactic lesson, Streat performed the felt reverberation that their functionalities and histories implied. This, then, marks the most prominent divergence from the cultural appropriation of Euro-American modernists working in abstraction: whether contending with the lived trauma of American racism, or the desire to animate and in some way teach folklore to new audiences, Streat refused to bind cross-cultural form to two-dimensionality, requiring its translation into real space. One writer for the Pittsburgh Courier understood this, stating:

If in linking the arts, it can be said that a half way mark between a portrait and the flesh is a stone statue, certainly Thelma Johnson Streat is a step between sculpture and dance ... Mrs. Streat's effort to inject life and emotion into graphic symmetrical forms is achieved.⁵⁴

⁵³ Performance Program, Sartu Theater, Los Angeles. December 9, 1951 (OHS).

⁵⁴ Zelda Ormes, "Noted Dancer-Painter to Show in First Local Performance Today", *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*. Undated, unpaginated clipping originally published in the *Pittsburgh Courier* (OHS).

For Streat, engagement with indigeneity was filtered through abstraction, yet mobilized in a broader educational quest for racial and cultural redress that did not wholly abandon the original context of creation. Intertextual and transmedial, her abstraction enabled a means of evading and redescribing the primitivist gaze, rather than deploying form in the name of a totalized “universal” freedom. In a painting called *Abstract Woman in Red*, a flat, purplish figure takes up almost the entirety of a blank red background, repeating the raised limbs and closed, grounded base of *Rabbit Man*. Kneeling on pendulous thighs, the dancer bends slightly to the side, arms again swooping upward to connect into a circle behind the head, displaying chest and torso musculature outlined in squiggles, jags, circles and triangles (Figure 6). As with *Rabbit Man*, familiar body parts and figurative formal language have been pared down to their most reduced, yet still recognizable forms. Streat noted later:

The thing most people find odd is that when I was a child I did very life-like portraits of people, and now I do almost child-like paintings of simple design. But they're more sophisticated than they look. That's what Picasso told me when he saw my work in France.⁵⁵

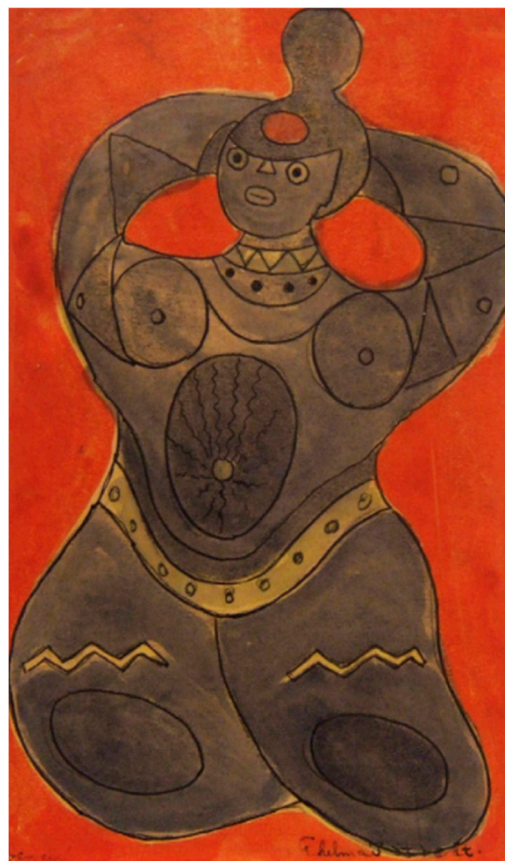


Figure 6. Thelma Johnson Streat, *Abstract Woman in Red*, c. 1945. Courtesy of The Johnson Collection.

It is not surprising that Picasso might have been impressed by Streat's paintings, yet her engagement with the “primitive” was not the unidirectional formalist extraction of the Western avant-garde, which stripped African and Oceanic objects down to their formal, surface significance; instead, it was rooted in pedagogical aspiration. A painting called *Robot*, and a design for a children's book in the collection of Mills College, also named *Robot*, similarly display a statue-like frontality rooted in a semi-circular

⁵⁵ Ebbitt, “Hypnosis Aids Artist in Work” (OHS).

ring shape at the bottom, again clasping arms upward above the head as though in a position of prayer, meditation, or submission. But in *Abstract Woman in Red*, the slight S-shaped undulation of the figure implies kinetic anticipation, the suggestion of a hip swing or shoulder dip to come.

Compare this to a photograph, likely dating to the mid-1940s, in which Streat holds and cups the air, her fingers frozen into carefully articulated curves (Figure 7). Such an elegant yet restrained gesture opens up, indeed necessitates, imaginative interpretation beyond what she is actually “doing.” It is as though she poses herself in real time against her corporeal identification with the painted figure—an oscillation or tension between embodying two-dimensionality, versus the embodiment of the performing artist. Mimesis seems to occur in reverse: the artist’s movements are informed by the painting. That Streat is *not* miming, but instead working abstractly, seems an important distinction that links the paintings and performances: if muralism was too “real” for her, neither were her performances meant to be illustrative, instead mapping out a pattern of movements to be activated. Mediating a wide intersection of cultural traditions, Streat’s transnational exchanges offer possibilities beyond the staid implications of cartography, a form of mapping that, in dance, too often extended to the enactment of racial signifiers meant to either bolster or deflect from identification with the “othered” culture trendy at any given moment depending on American imperial visions, domestic policies, or art market interests. By introducing a new *coexistence* or coextension between mediums, Streat re-routed attention from a scopic lens on the peoples under consideration, to a new humanism facilitated by the power of abstraction; one that rejected a neutral, un-marked personhood. For her, resonances between bodily and depicted gesture were not simply visual, but assigned new empathic, felt potential to the cartographic.



Figure 7. Thelma Johnson Streat, c. 1945. Photo: Alda Jourdan. Courtesy of The Johnson Collection.

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Abbreviations

The majority of the newspaper articles cited in the footnotes were not found in their original form, but as clippings or torn fragments included in scrapbooks and archival files. If the newspaper clipping was located in a scrapbook and/or archive, the abbreviations for each (below) are included therein.

NYPL	Special Collections, Thelma Johnson Streat Dance Clipping File, Jerome L. Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts
OHS	Thelma Johnson Streat scrapbook Coll 660, Oregon Historical Society Research Library
SFMAA	San Francisco Museum of Modern Art Archives
SFPL	<i>San Francisco Examiner</i> News Clipping Morgue, San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library
TJSP	Thelma Johnson Streat Project clippings file

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