

## How to Move Through It:

### U of M Dance MFA Candidate Alexandria Davis Teaches More Than Choreography

*by Amy Ransom*



I'm in my bedroom, dancing alone to one of my favorite artists, Colombian-Canadian musician and singer Lido Pimienta, when I hear the familiar sound of an incoming text. Using an old t-shirt, I wipe the sweat from my face, before tossing the T in my laundry bin and checking my phone. I've been swaying my hips, gliding through space and time in my sweats and socks to the crooning soprano and electro-synth pop rhythm of Pimienta's heavy bass and drums. In the steady calm of the pulsating beat, I've lost track of time and anxiety again. In tune with my own energy flow, I'm practicing my version of what U of M Dance Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) Candidate and Certified Dancer in Medicine, Alexandria Davis, has taught me this Winter before the pandemic. My glowing home screen draws me back to a new social reality and this unprecedented moment in history.

It's 8:49 P.M. on Monday, March 23rd. As the number of those who've tested positive for novel coronavirus, COVID-19, continues to grow exponentially, schools, employers, and government officials across the world issue more restrictive measures for social distancing. On March 11th, my college, the University of Michigan, issued a statement that all classes would transition online after their hospital announced its treatment of a coronavirus patient. On March 16th, Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer ordered state-wide restaurants, theaters, and other public areas to close. I recently opened a U of M email mentioning Whitmer's latest executive

order, effective tonight, Tuesday, March 24th at 12:01 A.M., directing Michiganders to stay home as much as possible. The past week of quarantining has felt like one never-ending day indoors and isolated. On this endless day, when I'm not up and moving, I spend most of my time glued to a screen: watching the news, watching online class lectures, and watching social media.

It's 8:49 P.M. on Monday March 23rd when Alexandria sends me a YouTube link to watch her latest dance performance, a four-minute, six-second solo piece titled, "March 23rd Improvisation: A dance for students and friends." A week ago, Alexandria sent me two encouraging messages in response to COVID-19, reminding me of "love on Earth," self-care, and the connection between mind, body, and spirit. Beginning a month ago, Alexandria and I sat down face-to-face over the course of three interviews to talk about the sexual, spiritual, and restorative power of dance. Now, even in times of social distancing, even when her final thesis workshop has been cancelled, she's showing me once again how she practices what she preaches.

In the YouTube description, Alexandria writes, "I wanted to share this video with you all on this beautiful day we have not seen before. Please join me in a dance of improvisation to whatever song you would like to move with. For me, I chose, 'Coming Home,' by Leon Bridges that is being played from my Apple Music iTunes account. I love each and every one of you." As she places the camera down and starts the song, I feel a wave of relief wash over me. The gentle strumming of Bridges' guitar sets the pace of her slow tumbles across her white, carpeted living room floor. She rises on her knees and pauses, arms outstretched in a warm, welcoming gesture.

### **Welcome to Class**

"Just so you know, I like hugs. That's just a thing!" Alexandria says with a big smile as she rises from her chair. I've just met her and she's already comfortable hugging me. We've spent the past hour and a half chatting at a cafe on campus and now she's off to teach her 10 A.M. Composition Class.

"Have a beautiful day!" she tells me with emphatic and contagious joy after we hug.

"Thank you! You too!" I exclaim, pleasantly caught off guard.

Her uncensored, sincere expression of positivity is startling to say the least. From the moment she enters a room, she stands apart from the crowd. Her walk is purposeful, her posture

is impeccable, and her eye contact is unflinching. A self-described “little firecracker,” she’s been told by Peter Sparling, former Chair of the U of M Department of Dance, that she’s “so overwhelming, but in the best way.” From a first impression, I’d definitely agree.

She speaks so quickly and has so much to offer that I find myself struggling to pin the “little firecracker” of an artist down on the page. For starters, this semester she’s led five dance classes at two local colleges. At U of M, she teaches Introduction to Composition, Stiletto Jazz, and Crescendo Detroit, a non-profit community music and dance program for youth ages 5-18. She’s also an Adjunct Professor of ballet and modern at Henry Ford Community College.

“Even though I don’t speak many languages, I dance so many languages,” she tells me, listing twenty-six of these languages, including some more personally impactful forms like Heels and liturgical or praise-worship dance.

Heels, Alexandria’s “personal aesthetic”, packs the fierce flair of HBCU dance line technique, Funk, and Jazz into bold four-inch pumps. After roughly a decade of performing and teaching high school dance line technique in her hometown of Gainesville, Florida, Alexandria knows how to perfect a powerful pose. In a clip of her U of M Fall 2019 Heels class, Alexandria shouts from behind the camera, “Let ‘em know now!” as her students point their stiletto-clad toes straight up in the air, ninety degrees from their lounging positions on the floor.

As I’ve already learned from the first minute of our meeting, Alexandria also knows how to command a room with her presence. In footage of her 2017 Gainesville-based youth project, *Licensed to Heels*, she joins the class and struts across the floor in tall black suede bottoms and form-fitting blue leggings, swaying her hips saucily to the fast-paced electro-fused rap beat of Miami hip hop artist Trina’s “Long Heels, Red Bottoms.” Her students, a group of preadolescent and adolescent girls, mirror her walk in the same way that she mirrors the “sexy walk” of her mother, the religious woman who first empowered her to take pride in her sex appeal.

“She would always tell me, be the best at everything you do...If you’re gonna be a hoe, be the best hoe,” Alexandria says of her mother, with a quick laugh and the flash of a smile.

Despite this strong statement, Alexandria and her mother didn’t always see eye to eye on issues of sexuality and virginity. As Alexandria got older and her hips developed, her mother seemed to reverse the kinds of moves she once taught. Out of fear for her daughter’s safety, she

no longer encouraged sexually liberating body awareness in everyday movements and mannerisms. A lesson on gliding across a room with hip-powered poise and grace became a lesson on purity and self-protection. She purposefully made Alexandria late to her high school dance line team audition. Even when her daughter made the team, she still refused to surrender her new stance. With an Alexandria-esque fierceness and unshakeable resolve, she quipped, “When you get on that field, you better not act like you like it.”

After spending a third of her life “liking it” as her mother originally intended, Alexandria now speaks with the maturity and insight of a grown woman acknowledging her mother beyond the scope of their relationship.

“My mom was struggling with her own empowerment of herself outside of the body, not understanding that as women, we are more than our vaginas and we are more than our hips,” she begins to explain. I put my pen down, mid-note, and look up. Her vulnerability demands more than just note-taking on my part. Her words carry the confident grace of a woman stretching into the fullness of her identity.

I sit up straight, showing my full attention, as she thinks her way out loud through a space of empathy. “My mom wasn’t perfect. She had her own issues that she was navigating through...But, she empowered me...she did the best she could.”

For Alexandria, sexuality is just one expression of self-empowerment. One of her current go-to dance forms in times of struggle, the African-created, drum-centered dance called Yanvalou, empowers her through the “realignment” of her body in prayer. Liturgical or praise-worship dance was one of Alexandria’s first dance forms, which she practiced with the full support of her mother.

Her first mom-approved dance instructor was Ms. Laverne Porter, who Alexandria now calls her “dance mom.” Ms. Porter is the first African American woman to graduate with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Florida. Her dance teachings combine African Diaspora “life center” movement and the famous modern fusion of classical ballet and Afro-Caribbean styles known as Katherine Dunham technique.

As an official member of the Laverne Porter Dancers, Alexandria performed at a number of classic and high-status Gainesville events like the Crab Festival, the Fifth Avenue Arts

Festival, and the Gator Homecoming Parade. During many of their performances, the Laverne Porter Dancers would include a liturgical dance to '80s and '90s soul-centered American Gospel hits like Richard Smallwood's "Total Praise" and Reverend Milton Brunson's "Safe in His Arms." Although Ms. Porter "would be the first one to say that her dance isn't always spiritual", she successfully instilled an understanding of the innate spirituality of all dance forms in her students.

"At the end of the day, just like myself, she realized that she had to put the source of our empowerment in everything," Alexandria recalls. "Whether you're shaking your butt or whether you're lifting your hands in praise, it needs to be in the fact that you're praising God to be alive this morning and you have the ability to lift your leg or wave your arm or do this spin or do this flip. She was one of the first people that taught me that I don't separate myself. I don't separate my dance...In everything I do, I'm dancing for praise."

I lean forward in my seat. I feel myself on the edge of an almost tangible, electric energy radiating from her voice. Her momentum carries me into self-reflection.

Unlike Alexandria, I haven't been dancing my whole life and I'm certainly nowhere near the level of expertise and talent required to master twenty-six dance forms. But my connection to dance aligns with Alexandria's purpose and passion. I started formally practicing dance only a year ago, during the Winter semester of my sophomore year at the University of Michigan. I had enrolled in my first introductory dance course and soon discovered that dance was a way to cope with my depression. At the time, I was living with someone who was psychologically and sexually abusing me. I didn't have enough distance from the situation to understand and name what was happening to me. I also didn't have the right language to understand and name the transformative spirituality of dance. But like faith, when I danced, I felt more than I could describe and that feeling was powerful enough to help me begin moving through my trauma.

In class, I moved to regain control over my body, ground myself in the present, and actually celebrate being alive. I remember freestyling for my teacher and peers to Janelle Monae's guitar-riffing, trumpet-touting, funky beat in "Electric Lady." I remember letting Janelle's electric energy and radical message of self-love flow through me. I remember praising my expressions, my movements, and my body. I remember praising the relaxed ease of my

smile, the power in the flip of my hair, and the freedom in my feet. I remember praising this miraculous ability I had discovered to slide, spin, and step, even if just for a few moments, into a healthier headspace.

### **Watch the Steps**

““Somebody almost walked off with all my stuff”,” Alexandria begins. She exhales. Brow furrowed, stare locked. Then, with urgency, with cadence, ““And didn’t care enough to send a note home

saying I was almost late

for my own solo conversation

or two sizes

too small

for my own tacky skirts.

What can somebody do

with something of no value

on an open market?

Did you get a dime

for my things?

Hey Man.

Where you goin’

with all my stuff?

I need my stuff.””

Her stare breaks and she smiles, returning from wherever she had been. “My mind escapes me because I haven’t really been in that poem.”

Back when she was pursuing her Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of Florida, Alexandria performed a solo piece to “Somebody Almost Walked Off Wid Alla My Stuff” from black feminist Ntozake Shange’s groundbreaking play, “For Colored Girls Who Almost Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf.” She began the performance by embodying the sexy walk of her mother. But when she tells the story, she doesn’t focus on the sexy hip sway. When she tells the story, she remembers her hands, her fingers, moving nervously, “always

moving.” She remembers old fights with abusive partners. She remembers running. She remembers

wearing a tank top

and Soffee shorts and

no underwear and

no bra and

no shoes and

Her car,

in the driveway and

Her house,

left behind and

To her first husband,

“Will you ever stop beating me?”

And to the boyfriend afterwards,

“You need to leave.

You need to go.”

And to herself,

“Do you care about you?

Do you wanna die?”

And this was not a performance anymore. She was not her mother. The sexy walk stepped off her hips and stood by the door. Leaving her bare. Leaving Alexandria Davis on her own on the floor, “framing her body,” moving silently to the back of the room, “circling,” sitting, “criss-cross applesauce,” telling an instructor and a room full of peers what she was going through, watching them cry.

“I am a survivor of domestic violence,” Alexandria tells me. “I’m not a victim because I want people to realize there’s a difference between the two things. Because if you survive it, that means it didn’t consume you. At one point in time, I got a little lost, I got a little down, but dance became my therapy.”

In 2010, Alexandria married her first husband. In the two years before they married, he treated her well. But after a month of being married, he became emotionally and physically abusive and started to destroy the house she owned.

At the time of her solo performance to Shange's "Somebody Almost Walked Off With All My Stuff", she was twenty-six years old and living with another boyfriend, someone who was also emotionally abusive and disrespectful to her property, someone who she dated for eight years. Alexandria remembers how her ex-boyfriend would blow cigarette smoke in her face and throw her clothes and hurl insults at her, calling her "insane, stupid, and retarded." She remembers his entitlement, his refusal to leave her house after asking him time and time again.

She remembers her self-blame, her self-abuse. She remembers not wanting to brush her hair, not wanting to be pretty, not wanting to engage in conversation, not wanting to invite others into her space. She remembers discarding her own value, breaking her own stuff.

She remembers her fiery determination, her resilience, her self-fellowship, her fight for self-love. She remembers creating art in her thoughts, in her voice, and in her body. She remembers praying, singing, drawing, and dancing in her home. She remembers shedding the fake smile. She remembers looking in the mirror and watching her seven-year-old self cry. She remembers "deconstructing" her walk, "retrograding" the dance phrase, retracing her steps, moving with herself, and sitting with herself. She remembers looking at her classmates, witnessing their shock after her performance, hearing them say, "Alexandria, we had no idea." She remembers this one classmate who "didn't get it." She remembers this one classmate who held racist beliefs about Black men. She remembers this one classmate who claimed that her body language wasn't "loud" enough to match the poem's words.

"Well, since you're incapable," Alexandria responds, re-enacting the memory, "In this moment of me sharing and me being real in my identity, here it is, *darling*," she snaps, catching fire in her Southern inflection. "While I sit by you in class every day, I go through these things. This is what I'm dealing with. This is my *stuff*. And while you thought I was just a typical angry black girl or whatever, you should know, this is my life. When I leave here, this is my life. When I am here, this is my life...What is *my stuff*? My stuff is *me*. So you don't get me right now, well that's cool. But I brought it to you."



### **Dance Back to Self**

Alexandria has always brought her full self wherever she goes, no matter how alone she's felt in doing that. She remembers being picked on in elementary and middle school for not fitting into what she describes as two racial "aesthetics."

"I've always been the odd person out because I live in the in-between...I've learned that there's these two aesthetics...You have one approach that is a Eurocentric way, which is what most of us operate in...and then you also have a very African way and when I try to find myself in both of these, I found that I did not fit into any of them...My mother put me into a school where I was the only Black kid in the class...I stayed there until I was seven."

I think of Alexandria at twenty-six looking in the mirror and seeing herself at seven. Now at thirty-one, she speaks of her younger selves with openness and empathy. Now at thirty-one, she responds to decades-old painful memories with her quick-witted sense of humor.

"It was strange, when I went home, people called me white girl because of how I talked, but when I went to school, people called me chocolate girl or black girl. They would be weird to me. There was this one dude named Michael, he would try to kiss me. He would be like, 'I want to kiss you because I think you taste like chocolate. I want to kiss you because I think you taste like Hershey's'", she laughs, mocking both his whiny, childish tone and his predatorial, racial and sexual harassment.

"When I went back home, when I went to a predominantly Black school, then everybody picked on me. Nobody wanted to be my friend. They'd be like, '...She thinks she's better... She's the oreo girl...And so I was like, 'I don't belong to anybody.'"

"That sounds so isolating," I respond.

"Yeah, but," She pauses. The two of us sit motionless. People continue walking, talking, typing, drinking their morning coffee. The life of the cafe buzzes around us as seconds stretch. Then, the little firecracker re-ignites.

"But it worked, you know? It didn't work at first, but it worked. I was like, 'Fine, since you guys aren't my friends, since you don't like me, I'm just gonna be this way.' It took away my expectations. It took away my expectations when I walk in the room and everyone stops

talking...I don't care. That's how I live my life right now. It's not that I'm saying I don't care about other people's feelings, but when it comes to me, I'm gonna be real with you."

Out of rejection grew Alexandria's unapologetic authenticity. Now, when others deny her space, she reclaims it with the well-practiced moves of a pro. In our conversation, she calls out Eurocentrism in dance auditions: how she's been told that her make-up and hair are wrong, how she's been labeled "too Afro-centric", how she's been "moved" and man-handled by a racist and sexist choreographer. She calls out the University of Florida's poor response to Richard Spencer: how she was afraid of the violence incited on campus, how she was afraid of being shot. She calls out a "disrespectful" exhibit from the Harn Museum of Natural History: how the artwork depicted American police brutality in terms of South African Apartheid.

She pulls up a clip of her protest piece, which she performed in that museum amidst the chaos of Spencer's visit. From her phone, I watch a few brief seconds of Alexandria gliding across a wide, relatively empty room. Within the bright white walls and neatly framed paintings, she traverses low and high levels of space with swift precision: crouching in a low, coiled spring, rising with an articulated torso and extended arms, commanding attention through contrast.

"I was in the center of that space dancing and choreographing. And people would walk around me, people would walk over me, people would step over me...I found these cardboard signs...I dressed myself up in this outfit that I thought looked like a slave. And it had stripes, so it also looked like a jail thing, and I wrote, 'At what point do I stop being considered a n\*\*\* and I begin to be considered Black or African American? Is one better than the other one?' On another one [cardboard sign], I put, 'I am free,' and on the back I put, 'I am not free.' I was dancing to a lecture by Joy Degruy about Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome..."

The piece earned her a spot at U of M's Dance MFA Program, where she continues to create authentic, self-expressive work combining her perspectives on female experiences within the African American community and healing from trauma.

In the proposal for her current thesis, Alexandria draws from Degruy's research on multigenerational trauma within the African American community. Again, Alexandria uses Degruy's research to traverse a white-washed space with swift precision. Only now, my eyes follow the movement of her written rather than embodied language. She starts by critiquing

Clark University professor Jeffrey Arnet's mainstream theory of emerging adulthood. Arguing against his "biased generalizations" of a one-size-fit-all developmental process, she commands attention to "the cognitive, physical, and social developmental inhibitors of repeated and prolonged trauma" that he excludes. In the context of Degruy, she then writes about how "skeletal, muscular, and neural trauma" develop in "compensatory" or "dysfunctional patterns."

I look down at my notes, where I've messily scribbled a question about compensatory patterns. In our hours of interviews, I often fall into rapt speechlessness. Listening to her is like watching a performance. The pacing, control, and power of her speech glides us through the conversation. Sometimes I forget that I'm not just a spectator. But now, her own idea prompts me to interrupt her flow. I fumble through the question, slowly finding my words.

"Um, I was really interested in what you were saying about compensatory patterns," I begin. "Um and it kind of made me think about how...our bodies physically carry trauma. Um, have you ever personally experienced or witnessed the development of compensatory patterns? Can you describe what that feels like or looks like?"

Having lived her research, Alexandria doesn't miss a beat (or say "um".)

"So, my relationships were compensatory patterns...Before I met my good friend, I explained to him that I didn't want to have children anymore. I told him I would rather be barren before I bring another child into this world... that's compensation."

Alexandria has always wanted to be a mother and a wife. She explains how these roles represent her personal desires and hopes. Her trauma deeply threatened this self-concept.

"That was me basically compensating for my trauma. Also, you begin to think that you can never be loved, that you can never have a healthy relationship because all I've endured in the past was trauma and hurt."

"Compensation in response to tension and trauma," she says, transitioning to a biological analogy. "In the presence of tension, all organisms and parts of the unit gather together to assist in furthermore compensating for the damaged party or ligament. What is the appropriate way to begin redistribution of duty, weight, and function?"

Alexandria's response to her own question is a personal step-by-step process for regaining balance and reclaiming selfhood, as inspired by Katherine Dunham's method of

self-interrogation, internationally famous choreographer Susan Rehourst's dailiness practice, and the energy flow mechanics of Laban Movement Analysis, a multidisciplinary framework involving psychology, kinesiology, and anatomy. From Dunham's self-interrogation, grew Alexandria's "detoxification."

"I've been looking at this thing called form and function. So self-care is the function. The form of self-care is detoxification. These are the steps. This is not proven, but this is just what I'm writing. I believe that detoxification can occur in four different phases, which is what my thesis work is about. It's basically acknowledgement, detachment, restoration, and then maintenance...It got me to the place of where I was able to leave the boyfriend who I was caring for and who I felt obligated to care for..."

As she energetically launches into a long explanation, I try to keep up with an abundance of important details involving the reconnection of mind, body, and spirit in response to trauma.

Acknowledging and detaching from what hinders her is part of Alexandria's "healing;" restoring herself and maintaining that healing is part of Alexandria's "being," or full self-acceptance. The process of dailiness, integral to restoration and maintenance, requires regular or daily psychological and kinesthetic self-reflection. The energy exchange between dancers can lead to spiritual community-building.

She also builds off her University of Florida project, *Dancing Back to Self*, a series of movement-based workshops designed to assist survivors of domestic violence with healing and being. Alexandria's current thesis offered a safe space for eleven African American women, mainly University of Michigan students, to begin detoxification through movement and dance. She had already facilitated a workshop with these women and a session with her professor and three peers. She was approaching the next phase of progress for her students and herself. She was preparing for her final workshop on March 19th and 20th. She was moving towards graduation from the university's MFA Dance program -- when suddenly the momentum of her hard work crashed.

### **Keep Moving Through It**

“And we’re gonna reach to the other side, just swaying or moving my body from side to side.” Alexandria narrates her stretch. She sits on her white, carpeted floor, arms, legs, and torso reaching to full length and height.

“And then I’m gonna take a nice big paint of the sky. Grab your favorite color and paint that sky and we’re gonna reach over putting our ear to our knee...” It doesn’t matter that she’s alone in her apartment, framed against a white wall. Her voice bursts with bright color from behind my screen. And for a moment, I imagine a streak of hot pink, my favorite color, tracing the arced path of her hand. I pause the video and smile, thinking of our recent conversation.

“Good afternoon!” Alexandria practically sings to me after the phone’s first ring. Her vibrant, cheerful tone travels the thousands of miles between us.

“Hi Alexandria!” We match frequencies, instantly closing the distance. I’m living with my parents in Miami, FL and she’s living on her own in Ann Arbor, MI. It’s reassuring to finally talk to her again. It’s 4:00 P.M. on April 9th, a little over two weeks after she posted her Leon Bridges video. Since then, she’s posted four more videos for her students and her friends, ranging in levels to accommodate everyone: beginners, advanced dancers, and just anyone who’s interested in dance. Her favorite video (also my favorite) titled, “Happy Dancing!”, is the sky-painting one for two of her friend’s children, who she calls her “special little dance friends.”

“How are you?” Alexandria asks me.

“I’m good. How are you?”

“I am doing incredible!” she exclaims. I’m flooded with relief and gratitude. Somehow, her optimism still surprises me like it’s our first conversation. “I’m finishing up with what I’m gonna write today with my thesis because I’m done. I’m not gonna write anything else.”

Although she couldn’t complete her final workshop, she’s still grateful for what she’s been able to accomplish and for the visual material she’s stored on her computer. Thankfully, it’s enough for her to graduate this semester. Thankfully, she also has what she needs to adjust to circumstance even when adjustment doesn’t come easily. She shares her initial response to the pandemic and how that’s evolved.

“At the beginning of this process, when we first were told we were coming home, I don’t know why but I was starting to feel like this was some sort of a joke. I was like, ‘Are you serious right now?...During that time, that first week or so when we were told to stay home, I would say that I took a lot of time to just pray...I was seeing different reports of ‘This is real; this is fake; this is contagious; this is not contagious... You know what, we kind of can’t trust anyone right now, so who I can trust is God.”

Alexandria explains how prayer and dance comforted her as she listened to both God and the media information she found credible.

“I am adhering to the different health guidelines of staying at home, social distancing, making sure that I’m being respectful of individuals again as I go out to the grocery store, wearing a mask, and different things like that,” Alexandria says.

“But when I find myself uneasy, I pray and when I find myself in a state where I’m a little bit anxious or I feel a little lonely, then I definitely dance. Some days I needed to listen to hip hop; some days I needed to listen to something spiritual; and some days, I needed to listen to Madonna or Gwen Stefani. So I just put on something that made me feel like moving and shared that with the world and I got a lot of responses in which people told me that I was lifting their spirits, which made me feel even better.”

Even if you aren’t spiritual, Alexandria’s practice can have the power to consistently lift your spirits. While COVID-19 differs from the trauma Alexandria addresses, her teachings can still positively impact how you cope with COVID-19. And while my sexual trauma differs from multigenerational trauma in the African American community, Alexandria’s work has changed how I personally approach posttraumatic growth.

She demonstrates our ability to push ourselves towards a deeper self-understanding. She shows by example how we can practice self-preservation regardless of circumstance. We can pray, dance, draw, write, sing, and speak to remember how we’re more than what happens to us. We can create art in our thoughts, in our voices, and in our bodies to remember how we own these parts of ourselves. To remember how we can still recreate ourselves. To remember how we can always *keep moving*.

It's 11:33 P.M. on April 16th, a week after I've spoken with Alexandria for our last interview and almost a month since I've left Michigan. I'm in my bedroom, dancing alone to the genre-fusing pop, soul, and country singer-songwriter PJ. As I begin swaying to the fast-paced opening guitar strums of her song, "This Is What It Looks Like," I remember all that I've learned from my first February meeting with Alexandria until now in April quarantine.

I remember how, from the moment she enters a room, Alexandria stands apart and moves apart from the crowd. I remember how the "little firecracker" struts across the floor in tall black suede bottoms and form-fitting blue leggings. I remember how Ms. Porter taught Alexandria to dance for praise and how Alexandria taught me to dance for praise. I remember how she acknowledged the spiritual "source of our empowerment" in every movement, whether that means "shaking your butt or lifting your hands in praise." I remember how I praised the relaxed ease of my smile, the power in the flip of my hair, and the freedom in my feet. I remember how Alexandria "deconstructed" her walk, "retrograded" her dance phrase, retraced her steps, moved with herself, and sat with herself. I remember how she glided across the Harn Museum of Natural History and traversed white-washed spaces with swift precision. I remember how she stretched across her white, carpeted living room floor, arms, legs, and torso reaching to their full length and height.

I'm spinning across my bedroom's hardwood floor in socks. Headphones on, I extend my arms, legs, and torso, reaching towards the walls and windows, breathing out the tension, claiming my space. As the song's chorus plays, I remember Alexandria's response to my last question, "What's your definition of resilience?" Even though she isn't physically here, our languages begin to fuse: her words, my movements. I imagine her response moving like a poem on a page, swimming below the surface of song lyrics in my stream of thought. I imagine her voice rising, carrying currents of rhythm:

"Resilience is when

no matter the circumstance

you keep getting back up

personally,

for me, resilience applies

to my approach and outlook  
on life and love for mankind.

Even though I have been treated unfairly,  
told I was unworthy,  
I am committed  
to pushing forward  
by making a way  
out of no way

It's like Dory says,  
"Just keep swimming,  
just keep swimming,  
just keep swimming  
swimming, swimming."

Resilience to do right  
even when met with cruelty,  
resilience to put yourself out there,  
even when past outcomes  
lean towards the unfavorable.  
pick yourself up by the bootstraps  
and try again  
through tears, agony, and at times solitude

stagnancy is not an option  
we must keep striving  
to live our lives to the fullest,  
laugh as much as possible  
and love unconditionally  
like we have never been hated.

Resilience is the will to live  
in midst of abuse



and the courage  
to change your situation  
even if it looks like starting  
completely over  
with nothing  
but your dignity  
to say

I didn't let that situation consume me.”

Sweat beads my forehead and stains my armpits. The song has finished. I'm out of breath for a few moments. Taking a sip of water, I hit replay on my phone. And then, I keep moving.