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Drawing on African American Vernacular Jazz Dance Traditions to Create a Socially Responsible Jazz Praxis

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Dance

by

Lisa Allin

Thesis Committee:
Professor S. Ama Wray, Chair
Assistant Professor Cyrian Reed
Professor Alan Terricciano

2023

DEDICATION

To

Diter, Joyce, Ron, and Isabel

in appreciation of their love

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Drawing on African American Vernacular Jazz Dance Traditions to Create a Socially Responsible Jazz Praxis
by
Lisa Allin
Master of Arts in Dance
University of California, Irvine, 2023
Professor S. Ama Wray, Chair

During the 1920s, jazz dance and live music emerged together in the United States as part of a larger body of Black Diasporic vernacular traditions. The originators of jazz were African American dancers and musicians, who collectively created jazz within an audial-somatic and social dance experience. This tradition was connected to their West African culture, which prioritized improvisation, polyrhythm, individualism, isolation of body parts, and a social spirit, including interaction with live music. However, during the decades that followed, influential entertainment genres habitually appropriated their dances and made them more suitable for White audiences. As a result, jazz dance (the focus of this thesis) became separated from musicians' interactions, blended with ballet and modern dance, and codified by White male choreographers. This style became known as theatrical jazz. Importantly, this process of claiming and defining jazz was made possible by pervasive patriarchy and legal segregation. First, the communal experience of jazz was usurped by a codified rendering of a technique that extracted African American ideas. Subsequently, jazz was framed with the orderliness of formal uniformity.

Theatrical jazz constitutes my background in dance. In other words, the elements of my skills and artistry (developed over decades of training) represent the mode by which jazz was overwritten with the notion of a singular innovator, namely specific White men

deemed to be the fathers of jazz dance. Following this complicated history, my thesis aims to render ballet-based and codified theatrical-jazz styles less central to the core of my "jazz" choreography by implementing original jazz traditions that honor the culture from which they initially emerged. As such, I depart from a common approach to jazz-styled choreography, which centers on codified movement and prescribes exactness to the dancers' performance while eliminating improvisation. In contrast, by implementing a praxis that centers on West African traditions, my creative process emphasizes improvisations with dancers and musicians collaboratively. Ultimately, I center live music, improvisation, polyrhythm, individualism, and community–the original African American jazz traditions.

Introduction

In 2020, during the Covid-19 lockdown and the time of George Floyds' murder,[1] I was an undergrad in the drama department at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), taking an online course in the History of Jazz Music. As a jazz dancer, I wanted a more comprehensive history of my art form. Dr. Dawn Norfleet, professor of music at UCI, covered how African American artists originated jazz dance. She illuminated how the forms were appropriated and white-washed for the dominant society in the United States of America (USA). In the wake of Floyds' death and Black Lives Matter[2] protests, I began to make connections to the style of jazz dance that I trained in and how it was a manifestation of cultural appropriation. I longed to understand the past and consciously transform my current jazz dance praxis to participate in the movement toward social justice for Black lives in the USA.

What is Jazz Dance, and Who Created It?

Jazz dance[3] has become an umbrella term with a shallow arc, blending varying degrees of African-descended dances and value systems into the edges of other dance forms; distinctions become blurred, and pioneering Black artists are underrepresented. Patricia Cohen, a dance educator who wrote "Jazz Dance as Continuum," describes theatrical jazz dance as a blend of "some of the kinetic elements of vernacular jazz dance

[1] In 2020, George Floyd, and African American male, was murdered by a White police officer while unarmed, handcuffed, and prone. Mobile-phone footage went viral and Black Lives Matter protests erupted, causing even the most liberal White Americans like myself to reckon with how we have contributed to upholding White supremacy.

[2] https://blacklivesmatter.com.

[3] My thesis focuses on 'jazz dance'; however, African cultural traditions do not separate the act of dancing from the act of playing music. Therefore, my continued use of a separated distinction is for understanding jazz dance as it relates to jazz music. Nevertheless, I will not always emphasize jazz dance, and may just say 'jazz' since my interpreted praxis always involves dance and music.

with the influences of ballet and modern dance, while eschewing most of the social elements" (2014, 7). These "social elements" touch upon African American people's deeply rooted ontology, including live music. Cohen also notes that in current jazz praxis, using live music is unusual, an element central to my research. Therefore, to focus on jazz's origins, I refer to my formative training as theatrical jazz,[4] a ballet-based style influenced by the lindy hop from African American vernacular dance. To illuminate African American contribution, I strongly question what I have inherited from colonialism and engage with another value system that decenters my formative training. Though 'colonialism' applies to multiple places across the globe, this thesis refers to the dominant way of life from European settlers, their descendants, and White society in the United States of America, of which I am a part.

Thesis Objectives

To understand why I chose to do this, I have reviewed the relevant literature on jazz dance and its African American foundation, which is underrepresented in jazz dance. Then, I specifically focus on an era when my style of jazz (namely theatrical and commercial) was "invented," and I show how this invention was at the expense of the true originators—African Americans who have undergone untold trauma across every sphere of life yet continue to embrace the possibility of something new. Lastly, I center a praxis on traditions from their foundation (referred to as African aesthetic traditions and the like throughout the paper).

[4] Before this research, I called myself a jazz dancer, which reflects a social norm in dance studios in the USA. Also, I have trained in many styles including commercial jazz, ballet, and modern dance. However, I identify here as a theatrical jazz dancer since that connects most directly to the part of my lineage where White male choreographers directly appropriated material from African American jazz dance artists.

Something new I discover in uncovering jazz dance's African American aesthetic traditions is the centrality of dance improvisation and the dancer's direct interplay with live music. In addition, polyrhythm (multiple centers of rhythm), individuality, and community are the African-rooted traditions of vernacular jazz that are the core of my attempt to decenter codified practices from my formative jazz training. Finally, I recognize my theatrical foundation as part of the practice I wish to interrogate and apply Dr. S. Ama Wray's methodology to carry out this interrogation. Central to the effort of this inquiry is working with musicians skilled in jazz music and collaborating with them. With this research, I hope to at least articulate my intended direction for decentering my jazz dance practice, illuminating where I have made advancements and where I need to probe further.

Thesis Content

The following chapters map a journey that encompasses my current research on African American history through the lens of dance and music, African aesthetic traditions, and the decolonization[5] of jazz dance. Since I seek to examine what engaging with a socially responsible praxis means, I begin with a thorough look at scholarship documenting the history of African and African Diasporic value systems and communal contributions to jazz dance. Then, I analyze the work of certain White "pioneers" of jazz who are recognized as progenitors of jazz dance. As outlined in the methodology section, my aesthetic values[6] stem from African aesthetic traditions of jazz dance. Finally, in the practice-to-research section, I outline what I experienced and observed while employing the methodology.

[5] Decolonization is a vast subject beyond the scope of this thesis. Nevertheless, as I decenter my formative practice, I make an effort towards decolonizing it.

[6] I use "aesthetic values" instead of "tools" (tools, in academic tradition, refer to the means that are used to conduct an experiment). "Aesthetic values" feel like a realm to be tuned into, whereas "tools" seems to objectify its subject. Since my thesis seeks to create social responsibility, it is important that I engage with the African Diasporic traditions respectfully both in words and praxis.

This thesis and its findings document my personal journey to decenter formative theatrical and commercial jazz dance training and consciously embrace the improvisatory conditions from which its jazz essence originally came. By building more informed respect without ignoring the painful truths of our past, I hope to move forward powerfully.

CHAPTER I: West Africa to North America

"It is that African heartbeat that has defined the style of America to the world" ~Debbie Allen (Uprooted, The Journey of Jazz Dance 2020)

Because jazz dance history is not widely disseminated, its tributaries are not well known, and this invisibility has allowed the patterns of racism in jazz dance to flourish in the USA. I advocate for the importance of a decolonized[7] jazz dance praxis by illuminating a long tradition of appropriating African Diasporic dance contributions. I will discuss significant historical moments of African Diasporic history unfolding in America and how those moments shaped jazz dance. I begin by describing its origins, tracing antecedents to the art form from West Africa to its emergent sensibilities as shaped by plantation life in North America. Then, after the Civil War, I focused on how enslavement and legal segregation affected jazz dance's development. Finally, I discuss Blackface Minstrelsy (explained later in this chapter) and Vaudeville Theater, revealing how ideas and information about what would later be called jazz dance traveled throughout the country. Notably, the tours of Vaudeville Theater are where two of my childhood dance teachers used to perform. Ultimately, I address the established but not widely recognized African origins of jazz dance and consider the received practice passed down to me. This reflection may help explain why I de-prioritize my formative dance training within this research.

[7] A search on Google provided a definition by the Oxford Languages; decolonize means "to free (an institution, sphere of activity, one's mind, etc.) from the cultural or social effects of colonization; to eliminate colonial influences or attitudes from."

Climbing Down the Roots of the Jazz Tree

Jazz dance exists within a continuum of rich African American cultural traditions that trace back to the continent of Africa. Before the slave trade to America began during the 17th century, the western and parts of central Africa were robust with a way of life that used music, dance, and storytelling in almost every aspect of their individual, familial, and communal activities. Jacqui Malone, a former dancer, historian of American dance, and author of Steppin' on the Blues, emphasizes, "The importance of instrumental music, song, and dance in traditional African life cannot be overstressed" (1998, 22). She connects these "strong attitudes" to the foundation of dance and music-making in North and South America (1998, 22). In Hot Feet and Social Change: African Dance and Diaspora Communities, co-edited by the late Kariamu Welsh, a choreographer, and esteemed award-winning scholar, contributors describe African cultures as being an "impossible feat of alchemy with the elements of mind, body, and spirit" (Welsh et al. 2019, xi). Early European explorers even observed these traditions. Brian Seibert, dance critic and author of What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing, shares a description of dance by one traveler to West Africa: "every member of their body, every joint, and even the head itself expresses a different motion, always keeping time" (2015, 30-31). This outsider observed some originating traditions of jazz dance: polyrhythm, which includes isolations of body parts, and syncopation (varying accents in music and rhythm), all rooted in West African dance.

The documentary The Evolution of African Dance by Waco Theater Center[8] presents contemporary versions of long-standing West African dance traditions. Undeniably, while watching the documentary, I recognized movements that reminded me of steps within tap

[8] The Evolution of African Dance, WACO Theater Center https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f0eWV5WLslM&t=820s.

dance, like "shuffle ball change," except the foot that would be shuffling hovered off the ground. Still, the most pronounced and consistent element was the percussive and grounded polyrhythm. These movements are eloquently described by a tribesman from the Bakebe people, who are natives of Cameroon; the dancer "creates within himself an echo of the drum. Once he sees the echo, he is dancing with pride" (Seibert 2015, 31). Seibert captures the essence of a form of dance that is constantly in dialogue with the music; he reflects, "The drummer directed the dancer, yet the dancer could also signal the drummer with gestures and rhythms: they could converse" (2015, 31). These accounts by Seibert and the Tribesman spoken of, along with Waco Theater Center's West African dance footage, capture how making the rhythm visible through an audial-somatic dialogue between dancers and drums illuminate the fundamental African aesthetic traditions of jazz dance.[9]

Lastly, adding to the bountiful traditions that gave rise to African Diasporic dance forms is the coded cultural significance of the movement as it served so many communities throughout enslavement and beyond. In "Morphology of Afro-Kinetic Memory: Analysis of Marginalized Jazz Dance," Moncell Durden, dancer and historian, addresses that "dance throughout the African diaspora is rooted in functional rituals that celebrate significant milestones in life: spiritual worship, healing, or celebration, for example. The dances have meaning and are reflected in the context of a lived experience" (2022, 64). In the United States of America (USA or US hereafter), the African Diaspora engaged with popular social dances within their own communities, like the one-step. However, they infused them with

[9] I use several versions of this phrase frequently. Though still generalized through my Western ethnocentricity, African, represents the people of western and central Africa and the African Diaspora. Aesthetic, according to the Oxford Languages, describes a people's concern and appreciation of beauty. Lastly, I speak of and use their traditions with great humility and reverence to the ontology of their people, something I can appreciate and respect from the outside, but cannot experience in the same way.

improvisation, polyrhythm, openness to individual style, a sense of community, and direct dialogue with live music. The result of these infusions eventually became jazz dance. The people of African descent have a long history of innovation that traces through slavery. Malone explains, "black dance is a source of energy, joy, and inspiration; a spiritual antidote to oppression" (1998, 24). During those times, many African dance traditions were maintained as the enslaved needed to empower themselves as a need to fight the brutality of plantation life, from which dance forms emerged, as highlighted in the following sections.

How the Roots of Jazz Dance Endured from Enslavement to Capitalism

Jazz dance is part of the US history of a nation that early colonizers built on the enslavement, appropriation, and genocide[10] of others. Robin DiAngelo, professor of multicultural education and author of White Fragility, states, "the US economy was based on the abduction and enslavement of African people, the displacement and genocide of Indigenous people, and the annexation of Mexican lands" (2018, 16). Moreover, she points out the destructive conditioning of "domination and submission" that the colonizers already internalized. The US has a history of being shaped not only by the emerging colony eventually freeing itself from British rule but by the continued brutality they inflicted upon Africans and their descendants in America until the present day (hence George Floyd's murder and countless other Black lives).[11]

[10] Lauren Kent, CNN, reports European settlers in North America killed 56 million indigenous people over one hundred years. https://www.cnn.com/2019/02/01/world/european-colonization-climate-change-trnd/index.html#:~:text=European%20settlers%20killed%2056%20million,London%2C%20or%20UCL%2C%20estimate.

[11] Unarmed Black males die disproportionably at the hands of police https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database. Also see My

During the transatlantic slave trade, twelve million people from multiple empires and regions of West and Central Africa were captured into slavery. Eventually, their core cultural traditions would innovate African American vernacular jazz dance. As Dr. Brenda Dixon Gottschild, choreographer and anti-racist cultural worker, exposes in her seminal work Digging the Africanist presence in American Performance Dance and Other Contexts, "Middle Passage and subsequent wrenching experiences of the African diaspora stripped African peoples of their societal organization, but not of their cultural systems" (1998, 12). Rather than disappearing altogether, these African and now Diasporic dances developed yet were affected and exploited by colonizers who created a society that proclaimed everything of value arose from Europeans and their White descendants in the USA.

The novelty that surfaced from African American life was assumed to be the property of enslavers. This ruthless power dynamic maintained its hold beyond enslavement. As a result, Black vernacular innovations were often appropriated and restyled for White audiences. I will elaborate on appropriation later in this chapter. Eventually, these socialized and legalized power relationships continued through legal segregation. They allowed for the appropriation of African American innovation during the Jazz Era by White male choreographers who blended it with other forms like ballet. The result was theatrical jazz dance as seen on stages and in film and passed on to dancers like me.

Furthermore, the appropriated theatrical jazz dance I learned was also affected by capitalism. In the 1619 Project, Hannah-Jones argues that since the first slave ships arrived in America, slavery has shaped the country's development. While Jones focuses on the role

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Grandmother's Hands by Resmaa Menakem to understand how implicit bias, police protocol, and survival instincts relate to these shootings.

of slavery in creating modern capitalism, my thesis concentrates on how the African Diaspora came to innovate jazz dance under the tyrannical rule of capitalists. Undoubtedly, capitalism directly impacts the shaping and exploitation of the art form. Takiyah Nur Amin, dance scholar and academic success strategist, contributed to Jazz Dance with an essay titled "The African Origins of An American Art Form." Amin argues that "the primary ancestry of jazz dance can be found by studying African dance forms and how they changed in the context of plantation life" (Amin 2014, 35).

In the essay "The African Origins of An American Art Form," Takiyah Nur Amin describes how Africans in America drew on their healing cultural dances and music traditions to cope with their circumstances' harsh and relentless reality. As a result, these art forms grew on longer-standing practices traced to the African continent. Nevertheless, when White enslavers and choreographers took Black vernacular dances, there was no regard for their cultural tradition context and meaning. In addition, it is crucial to understand how the economic circumstances relate to racism in jazz. The legally segregated African Americans were also "systematically cut off from the symbolic rewards and economic profits of their inventions" (Gottschild 1998, 23). As the movement ideas were appropriated by White dancers, the traditions' aesthetics were diminished. Regardless, the White artists became monetarily well-off, affording little to no credit or compensation to the originators.

Emerging Patterns of Appropriation

Through the African Diaspora's inherited wisdom and the vagaries of plantation life before the civil war, the Cakewalk appeared, the first of many popular dances to emerge,

delighting and benefiting White society. Steve Zee, professor of tap dance and history, elaborates in his lecture demonstration, "Tap Dance is the History of America" (TedxSoCal), that the Cakewalk is a dance created by enslaved Africans on plantations, mocking their enslavers. Ironically, White society loved this dance, ignorant of the meaning. Notably, it was through Minstrel shows that the Cakewalk dance became popular. Amin notes the research of Harriet Lihs, "the most common finale of any minstrel show included the audience participating in the Cakewalk. While White dominant society enjoyed showing off their enslaved dancers and copying their moves for Minstrelsy, the enslaved did not receive compensation for their art form. The Cakewalk, a comparatively rhythmic African Diasporic song and dance style, continued to spread across mainstream America (and beyond) from about 1845-1900 through social dance and theater circuits.

Around 1910 came the Ragtime dance craze based on "a style of piano music developed around the turn of the twentieth century" (2022, 281). In an essay titled "Ragtime Dance," Richard Powers, instructor of dance history and social dance at Stanford University, commented on how it was based on European ballroom dances that had become popular preceding the early 1900s. African Americans engaged with these dances but with the exhilarating syncopated rhythm of Ragtime music. European influences are entwined in the roots of jazz dance, but it is the syncopated polyrhythm made visible on the body that White Americans came to desire.

This new and exciting style of Ragtime dance was adapted by White performers and popularized socially through their performances in Vaudeville theater of the time. Danielle Robinson, professor of dance ethnography, cultural studies, and dance history, and writer of "'Oh, You Black Bottom!' Appropriation, Authenticity, and Opportunity in the Jazz Dance

Teaching of 1920s New York," asserts that the Ragtime craze "constituted the first time that America was dancing 'black,' putting black dancing into white bodies on a mass scale" (Robinson 2006, 38). She claims it was "notably different from the Cakewalk craze because its primary representatives were white dancing teams" (2006, 26). Despite the cultural appropriation, African Americans resiliently continued to generate dance from their unique and creative way of life, all of which prelude the jazz era of the 1920s. Notably, this continues a pattern of Black vernacular dancers creating new and outstanding dances, which White people soon appropriate for White audiences.

Blackface

My childhood dance journey in the 1980s soon found me in a neighborhood tap school in the Los Angeles suburbs. My teachers, Jean Reese (b. 1924) and Louis DaPron (b. 1913), were former Vaudeville dancers who ran the small studio. Headshots of celebrities DaPron, the owner, had worked with cluttered the walls. The most curious photo was of two White men in Blackface. I often pondered that photo and scoffed at their horrible clown makeup, not knowing what it signified. Nine-year-old me wondered: why didn't they pick nice bright colors? Finally, I asked Ms. Jean, who shrugged her shoulders and replied, "I wish he wouldn't keep that photo up." I could tell it was something terrible, but I respectfully did not push the subject and would not come to understand the full significance of Blackface until nearly forty years later.

It was decades later, during my "delayed" college education and after enjoying my dance and musical theater career, that I understood the horrific nature of Blackface minstrelsy theater. Amin informs that Blackface was when "White performers covered their faces with black grease paint or burnt cork and performed hyper-stylized, satirized

versions of black dances derived from plantation traditions" (2014, 40). She connects how Black folk dances became popular through minstrel shows exclusively for White audiences, which leads me to consider the connection between Blackface and theatrical jazz dance. Lee B. Brown, professor and jazz philosopher who wrote "Can American Popular Vocal Music Escape the Legacy of Blackface Minstrelsy?" proposes "the minstrel hypothesis," meaning that "all American popular music is indebted to blackface minstrel theatre" (2013, 92). Though he challenges the hypothesis as an oversimplification, Brown explains that the Blackface tradition carried through to traveling shows that developed in the 1870s, known as Vaudeville Theater. These racist images portrayed by dancers emanated throu gh theater circuits on White bodies for White audiences. Malone asserts,

> Soon hundreds of blackface minstrel performers were appropriating African American art forms and successfully crisscrossing the Atlantic to showcase their stolen goods (1996, 54).

Furthermore, Black minstrel troupes were soon formed in 1855 and well established by 1870. Malone explains, "hundreds of freed slaves saw minstrelsy as a possible escape from poverty as well as an opportunity to cultivate and nurture their artistic talents" (1996, 54). She further summarizes, "The dances that began on the farms, plantations, levees, and urban streets of colonial America evolved through black face minstrelsy and moved onto the 'stages' of traveling shows, vaudeville, musical theater, cabarets, and nightclubs" (1996, 106). Regardless of the monstrous effect of Blackface minstrelsy, dance for African American performers was simultaneously practiced in their communities as a socially sanctioned way to be in community while navigating systemic

oppression, all while seeking employment parodying themselves in Blackface theater, to ironically improve their status. The reality of their social status meant their vocational choices were highly minimal.

Conclusion

The suffering African Americans endured, inflicted by the dominant White society, was consoled by the community dances and music they created together. The Cakewalk and Ragtime were just the beginning of more social dances from African Americans that would impact the masses. As their dances were appropriated for the enjoyment of the dominant White society and damaging racist caricatures of Blackface minstrelsy emanated, injustices towards Black people relentlessly continued. Still, African Americans resiliently reacted by creating more dance and music. Through the African aesthetic traditions within their immediate communities that eventually spawned jazz, they continued to call each other to dance and play music, respond to life, and create. Consistently, the music followed the dance, and the dance followed the music. The plethora of creative output from African Diasporic core cultural traditions in America comprise many of these dances, as with jazz.

CHAPTER II: From the Jazz Age to My Training in Dance

The previous chapter investigated the early dances that manifested through the early 20th century and how they were a precursor to the dawn of jazz dance. In this chapter, I will turn to the Jazz Era beginning in the 1920s, when jazz began to appear as such. In particular, I will focus on jazz's African aesthetic traditions and how they diminished as White society sought to absorb and modify African American vernacular jazz (aka the lindy hop) and place it in a different context, as with the Ragtime and Cakewalk dance crazes. To do so, I first discuss the impact of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers. Then, I critically examine the appropriation of their novel movement and the White choreographers who drew from it to shape their theatrical jazz dance styles. Finally, I attribute African American choreographers who received far less credit as contributors to theatrical jazz dance. All in all, I look at the development of jazz dance on both sides of the racial divide of legal segregation.

Development of Jazz During the 1920s and 30s

Originally known as lindy hop, jazz surfaced as a popular dance and music form in ballrooms and on stages during the 1920s and 30s, during the time of legal segregation.[12] As African American communities continued to strive forward in dance, they continued to create sensational dances. To further understand what constantly gives rise to exciting, polyrhythmic dances, I highlight five of their many cultural traditions: improvisation,

[12] Right after slavery was abolished in 1865, racial segregation between Whites and other races (especially towards Blacks) became legalized in the USA. Starting in the South, under separate (but certainly not equal) conditions, legal segregation soon moved across the nation https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/jim-crow-laws.

polyrhythm, individuality, community, and simultaneous dialogue between dance and music. Malone illuminates that Black vernacular dance and music "took a giant leap forward" during the 1920s through the 1940s and eventually "revolutionized American culture" (1996, 106). This "giant leap" signifies the Jazz Era that began in the 1920s when night clubs in Harlem became a cultural hotspot for African Americans to dance the "lindy hop." This new dance development was unique because it was the first time America witnessed fully expressed Black dance on Black bodies on their terms.

Some scholars argue this dance style is the original jazz dance, even though lindy hop dancers did not necessarily use that label for themselves. As Durden declares, "The dance of these pioneers is jazz. No qualifier is needed" (2022, 63). To build his argument, Durden stresses the importance of understanding the impossibility of imitating African American dance styles with the same results (I will explain the imitation in another section below). He elaborates, "morphology can only happen from within a culture. It's what keeps jazz, jazz" (2022, 67). By that, I infer that the particular "cool" feeling expressed through movement witnessed in Black vernacular jazz is cultivated through a deeply rooted cultural experience within their community. Gottschild quotes Robert Farris Thompson, a historian who specialized in Africa, "The aesthetic of the cool" is "an all-embracing, positive attribute which combines notions of composure, silence, vitality, healing and social purification" (1998, 12).[13] When observing African American vernacular dancers, I would describe this

[13] Wray, in her dissertation "Towards Embodiology: Modelling Relations between West African Performance Practices, Contemporary Dance Improvisation and Seselelame", argues that Thompson's theory is overly reductive (2017, 44). Adding to the conversation, Jill Flanders and Michèle Moss in "Jazz Dance from 1970 into the Twenty-First Century" expand this notion with terms like "performance of attitude," that convey "all aspects of the competitive spirit" (2014, 61).

“cool” aesthetic as balancing rhythmic punctuation and grace. It cannot be readily taught to an outsider in a dance studio without missing significant subtleties.

Centering on what happened in Harlem nightclubs in New York City during the 1920s reveals how lindy hop defined and refined itself. One particular club, the Savoy Ballroom, was the most popular space for jazz's hottest steps and sounds and is where Chick Webb, a drummer, built his reputation as a dancer’s musician. His success was attributed to his connection with the dancers and the fact that he experienced the same sensory vibration as they did. The dance was in him, and his music was in the dancers. Recall “dance and music as one” is an African diasporic core tradition and an African aesthetic tradition of jazz. The lindy hop developed through the direct musical influences between dancers and musicians in the Savoy Ballroom; they constantly informed and inspired one another’s expression.

A closer look at the relationship between the dancers and musicians reveals both social and economic dynamics. Christi J. Wells, musicologist, dancer, arts educator, and author of Between Beats: The Jazz Tradition and Black Vernacular Dance, explains that the “dancers responded individually and collectively to the music with a constant flow of ever-changing moves, rhythmic variations, and new dance styles” (2021, 62). The musical and kinesthetic interplay informed aspects of The Savoy's sociality. The dancers became the main priority in these exchanges, while the musicians were expected to deliver fresh music that inspired the dancers to dance with excitement and innovate new moves constantly. Wells explains, “As a regular part of making a living, Swing Era dance musicians were expected to construct a rhythmic framework and musical space that sparked dancers’ energies and inspired their steps, spins, and improvisations” (2021, 64). The musicians

were required to provide highly danceable music to maintain employment, and jazz dance was refined through this dialogue between dancers and musicians while heightened by these economic circumstances. Wells accounts for Chick Webb (their bandleader) by quoting Frankie Manning, a legendary Whitey's Lindy Hopper,

> [Webb] would always want to know, "hey man, how do you like this tune or how do you like this tempo"...But that was also a thing that musicians who worked in the Savoy looked for. They wanted to know if the dancers liked their music, and as long as the dancers liked their music, they were gonna work (2021, 79).

Webb had the most successful band (Chick Webb Orchestra) and accompanied the competitive dancers at the Savoy as they became in demand for performances. His band dominated the scene at the Savoy because his "tempo choices navigated the ebbs and flows of energy during an evening to keep dancers motivated and on the floor without overwhelming or exhausting them" (Wells 2021, 83). As with drum-dancing originating in West Africa (chapter one), the lindy hop stems from the same culturally rooted, spiritually felt experience created in direct dialogue between the musicians and dancers. Webb claims his superiority came through this intimate connection (2021, 62). The constant exchange looped through the dancers and musicians, defining the band's music-making at the Savoy through the 1930s. In addition, competitions between the best dancers pushed their limits before the latest creations were presented in live theatres. Eventually, these elite dancers became Whitey's Lindy Hoppers and performed professionally with Webb's band for various shows. For the first time, the greater American public witnessed Black dancers performing virtuosic dances on their own terms, with musicians doing the same within

their bands and orchestras. This development was monumental, and it is no wonder that the beginning of the Jazz Era[14] was so influential.

Appropriation, White-Washing, and Black Resilience

What was profound about the early Jazz Era[15] is that African Americans succeeded momentarily in creating racial uplift. The "black associations of jazz dancing and music did not need to be veiled, as they had been with ragtime; rather, they were celebrated" (Robinson 2006, 38). At last, White Americans valued Black dancing on Black bodies on their terms. Nevertheless, dominated by White proprietors, mass entertainment subsumed them as was done in Blackface minstrelsy and the emerging Broadway scene. Conservative members of White society insisted on "taming" African American vernacular jazz to make it more acceptable according to their standards. For example, the interpretation of African American dances by famous ballroom dancers Vernon and Irene Castle "transformed black culture into something that white Americans could safely partake of" (2006, 24). The couple functioned to model how to "tame" Black vernacular moves for White society.

Additionally, what adds insult to injury regarding appropriation is that the dire economic circumstances coupled with legal segregation forced African Americans to take the subservient role of teaching their original dances to White performers. White-washing and denying African American invention intensified as Black dance teachers were exploited for White artists' economic gain. Robinson states, "a key job requirement of 1920s black dance teachers was tactical invisibility to white audiences" (2006, 30). The Jazz Era seemed to embrace African American vernacular jazz dance, yet, only for a moment before it too

[14] Since so much of American art is influenced by jazz, I speculate that we are still in the Jazz Era.
[15] The Jazz Era is considered to span the 1920s and 1930s; however, as with the previous footnote, I propose that we are still in it. Therefore, I refer to these first two decades as the "early" stage.

was modified and commodified for White society. While observing this ongoing denigration throughout history, their resilient traditions never broke despite appropriation from outside their communities and the shift in "jazz music's disarticulation from social dance" (2021, 110).

Theatrical Jazz Dance Contributors: Shifting the Spotlight

Once Black vernacular moves and styles were absorbed and appropriated from the culture that they came from, the dance forms modeled for the stages of Broadway and movie musicals bore only limited resemblances to these African American antecedents; these jazz styles can be defined as "theatrical jazz." Although African American theatrical jazz choreographers participated in mass entertainment, the socio-economic effects of legal segregation shaped whose theatrical jazz dance styles became more widespread. The theatrical jazz style that emanated on a mass scale was reductively called "jazz dance," even though it became something different, distanced from the African aesthetic traditions of jazz. White male artists, by default, were more likely to be employed in the entertainment industry while using the hot styles of African American vernacular jazz.

Black and White choreographers experienced differentiated access to power, which carried over to the mainstream style of theatrical jazz dance. For example, 20th-century choreographer Jack Cole had the opportunity to show his jazz-influenced style on the stages of Broadway and film much more so than his African American contemporary Katherine Dunham. While Cole is often considered an originator of jazz dance, Teal Darkenwalk, professor of dance, in "Jack Cole and Theatrical Jazz Dance," more accurately describes him as the "father of theatrical dance" (2014, 82). Although in the same book, Lindsay Guarino and Wendy Oliver, jazz dance scholars and editors of Jazz Dance, argue

that "Countless figures are responsible for moving jazz dance out of the social dance halls…and into dance studios and onto stages" (2014, 73). Indeed, their list includes six White choreographers and four Black ones, including Dunham. Furthermore, the authors state that their list is incomplete. Despite the troubling history of muting the role of Black choreographers in the development of both vernacular and theatrical jazz dance, if you ask Google (I first asked in May of 2022) who originated jazz dance, its reply is likely to credit White male choreographers from the middle of the 20th century, including Jack Cole and Bob Fosse.

As it happens, Cole and Fosse instructed two of my teachers, which places my training within the same problematic history. Before beginning this research, I believed that these figures originated jazz dance. Though I now understand that jazz dance originated from the lindy hop dancers, popular media still views prominent White choreographers as jazz dance's creators. The emphasis placed on White male choreographers like Cole and Fosse casts a shadow over African American pioneers and those of the collective community of dancers. It not only obfuscates the history of vernacular jazz dance but even the role that Black choreographers played in developing theatrical jazz dance itself.[16]

To expand the perception of who and how jazz dance originated, I began by centering the lindy hop dancers as the original innovators who stand on the shoulders of their African and enslaved ancestors – African American contributors to theatrical jazz dance who were less credited and employed than their White male contemporaries. Saroya Corbett, certified Dunham technique instructor, who contributed "Katherine Dunham's

[16] This reflects how US society is conditioned to believe Whiteness is the originator of most things that society values, including jazz dance.

Mark on Jazz Dance," attributes that Dunham's company asserted the value of African American vernacular dance and thus influenced jazz dance's vocabulary and acceptance during the decades preceding the Civil Rights movement. Her highly acclaimed school employed many of the great choreographers of the time, including Peter Gennaro, co-choreographer of West Side Story (2014, 94). Gus Giordano also studied there, whose codified technique carries his name. Yet, I never knew Dunham was responsible for the most standard practice within a studio jazz class: the isolation of body parts. Talley Beaty was her student, and Claude Thompson (my teacher and early mentor) was Beaty's student. Therefore, Dunham's jazz influence has reached me and countless others who stand on her shoulders.

My ignorance of Dunham's contribution may be because her codified methods were not directly used in professional musical theater and film productions and therefore did not become widespread. Bob Boross, international jazz teacher and choreographer, also a contributor to Jazz Dance, in "Donald McKayle, Jazz Dance Then and Now" and quotes the late dance professor of the University of California, Irvine (UCI), "A lot of people who were on Broadway went to her [Dunham] classes, but there was no 'step' if you trained with Dunham that you would do on Broadway" (2014, 127). He mentions that Jack Cole and Bob Fosse were instrumental in making jazz dance in-demand on Broadway. Notably, he recalls his experience as part of the original cast of Westside Story, where McKayle denies that it was jazz dance, "It was very theatrical, quite marvelous, but the part closest to jazz is what Peter Gennaro did" (Boross quoting McKayle 2014, 128). Jerome Robbins took credit for a fair amount of Gennaro's work, like the mambo section in the gym scene. Lastly, McKayle acknowledged the prejudices towards jazz dance but was hopeful that things were turning

around since university programs take it more seriously than before. Notably, through UCI, I became educated about Dunham's contribution to theatrical jazz and interested in prioritizing an artistic praxis with the core traditions of jazz.

Learning of Pepsi Bethel, I now perceive him as an unsung African American hero of jazz dance. Karen Hubbard, a jazz dance instructor in "The Authentic Jazz Dance Legacy of Pepsi Bethel," reports that he was an original Whitey's Lindy Hopper who dedicated his practice to preserving authentic jazz dance and worked on Broadway as a teacher. He was not as well known in the canon of jazz dance as Cole or Fosse; however, his legacy was built by "regarding the authentic roots and characteristics of U.S. indigenous dance" (2014, 75-80). Bethel was originally a Savoy Ballroom dancer who also trained in modern dance. He developed a style that fused modern with the vernacular jazz movement and was innovative throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

According to Wells, Bethel is a prime example of Stearns's tendency to obscure African American contribution to theatrical jazz choreography since "Bethel receives brief mention in Stearn's book as a member of the 'young generation' of Savoy Ballroom dancers but, notably, not as a choreographer" (2021, 196). Wells reconsiders the seminal work of Marshall and Jean Stearns's advocacy for jazz dance during the mid-20th century, which seems to serve as a cautionary tale for White scholars like myself. In their effort to uphold African American folk art as most worthy in and of itself, the Stearns's simultaneously glossed over essential contributions made by theatrical jazz choreographers like Bethel. He eventually became a teacher for the Alvin Ailey dance school, ran a dance company in the early 1970s, and "published his manuscript on authentic jazz dance with support from the National Endowment for the Arts" (2021, 200). I speculate that if segregation laws were

not in play, he would have become well-known as a Whitey's Lindy Hoppers, choreographer, and scholar of authentic jazz dance.[17]

Circling back to Jack Cole's influence on the jazz world, I will briefly analyze how he, and other White male choreographers, gained their indomitable power. McKayle reflects on his time working with Jack Cole—a prominent Broadway and movie musical choreographer in the mid-20th century who drew heavily on the lindy hop style for its intricate footwork (Boross 2014, 126). Darkenwalk exhibits that Cole drew inspiration from his experiences at the Savoy Ballroom, modern choreographers in the 1930s, Hindu dancing, and ballet. He appropriately labeled his style "jazz-ethnic-ballet" (2014, 84). Many dancers were influenced by his work, like Matt Mattox, Bob Fosse, and "his muse, Gwen Verdon" (2014, 84). Verdon was also essential to the creation of Fosse's legacy. Cole acknowledges theatrical jazz dance as a derivative of lindy hop, which adds to the irony of being called a pioneer of jazz dance.

Moreover, Laura Smyth, Professor of Dance at Loyola Marymount University, wrote a 2014 thesis, "Jazz Dance in the African-American Vernacular Tradition: Reframing the Choreographic Approach to Concert Jazz Dance in the 21st Century," explains how the theatrical jazz dance of Cole and Fosse, are not "reflective of the Black experience" (2012, 4). In addition, she states that famous works like Jerome Robbins West Side Story (1957) and Bob Fosse's All That Jazz (1979) were "cemented" while "less codified works of the African American predecessors were forgotten" (2012, 4). Nevertheless, villainizing these White choreographers for "stealing jazz" misses this point: that the massive social

[17] I made multiple attempts to obtain a copy of Bethel's manuscript through different library systems, but to no avail (perhaps because it is out of print).

conditioning of Whiteness supports their power (I will further investigate this in the next chapter).

Moncell Durden, in an Instagram,[18] explains how specific Black vernacular dance moves like the camel walk and the watusi were modified and stylized into precise shapes and steps in Bob Fosse's famous choreographic work, the "Rich Man's Frug" He does not say it is poor choreography but instead that it is neither original nor jazz. Moreover, the core jazz concept of improvisation is killed off by blending the moves into precise positions and poses. S. Ama Wray, creator of Embodiology®,[19] my advisor and jazz professor, in "A Twenty-First-Century Jazz Dance Manifesto," explained that with jazz dance improvisation, the components get "broken down and rearranged in limitless ways" (2014, 14). Codifying movement to precision departs from this fundamental tradition. Cheryl Mrozowski, chair of theater and dance studies at Wheaton College, where in "Bob Fosse's Jazz Revolution," explained that for Fosse, a sense of community was squashed by his supreme dominance, and joyful dancing was inhibited – "the roster of injured dancers seemed to make it about anything except 'joy'" (2014, 101). Besides, his demands for a highly sexualized movement style raise questions about patriarchy and its relation to jazz.[20] Nonetheless, Fosse extracted styles and images from Black acts[21] and declared that his work was in imitation of theirs during the earlier part of his choreographic career.

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[18] Retrieved January 2022.
[19] https://www.embodiology.com.
[20] The complexities of how patriarchy influenced jazz dance are vast and would require another thesis to investigate thoroughly.
[21] Moncell Durden features an interview with Bob Fosse revealing how he initially purchased dances from African American artists, before appropriating certain characteristics. BobFosse from the horses mouth.

Conclusion

My thesis seeks to engage with jazz dance in a way that fosters social consciousness by making visible the aesthetic traditions of African American people and artists. Wells' critical point is that an entire African American community innovated jazz through the aesthetic traditions of jazz that stem back to West Africa, not from the individual creative ideas of a few White male choreographers in the middle of the 20th century. During this period of legal segregation, White artists catered to White audiences, accelerating Black artists' invisibility.

The scholarship I reference throughout the first two chapters emphasizes the importance of understanding African American history as American history and clarifies the traditions of the systems and wisdom involved with jazz. We must remember that theatrical jazz consisted of appropriated steps and styles of African American vernacular jazz blended with other influences, especially ballet. Wells emphasized this critique by referring to DeFrantz, who notes that today's concept of jazz alludes to "codified movement form based on the extrapolations of (primarily white male) American choreographers and teachers" (2021, 28). Wells helps to explain how much of the essential qualities that made up jazz diminished, especially as it related to swung rhythm and groove (2021, 29-30). Lastly, Black vernacular dance celebrates and advances individual expression, not uniform replication. I recognize that jazz is a living experience of dance and music in mutual dialogue, passed on through African Diasporic cultural tradition between individuals and communities.

CHAPTER III: Methodology

In the previous chapters, I investigated the deeply rooted cultural ontology of the traditions from which jazz dance emerged. In this chapter, I will reinforce how I came to understand these traditions as aesthetic values that will be used in my practice. They are derived from my training in Dr. Wray's improvisation praxis (which includes Embodiology®) and the African aesthetics of jazz as articulated in the relevant scholarship. The individual explanations of each African aesthetic tradition of jazz dance serve as the aesthetic values to be applied in the next chapter, Practice to Research, to create jazz dance performances. Lastly, by experimenting with these aesthetic values, I propose a foundation for my expanded jazz practice, further supporting a socially responsible approach to choreography within the field of jazz dance.

Reflecting on a Socially Responsible Mentality

I approach a methodology for creating jazz dance with an understanding of the African American genealogy of the practice. As a White choreographer and educator, de-centering a jazz dance practice from the dominance of theatrical jazz begins with a willingness to suspend Eurocentric ethnocentricity. Melanie George, jazz dance artist and scholar, in her essay "An Overview of Jazz Dance in the Twenty-First Century," advocates that as we decolonize the practice, teaching, and study of jazz dance, we move towards the "health and progressiveness of present-day jazz" (2022, 24).

To be effective in moving towards what George describes as health in jazz dance, I will examine recent advancements in jazz dance that interrogate the topics of racism and

inequality while also relating these findings to more traditional scholarship. As the editors of Rooted Jazz Dance Africanist Aesthetics and Equity in the Twenty-First Century, Lindsey Guarino, Carlos R. A. Jones, and Wendy Oliver assert, “While we cannot change the past, we can change the climate where the [jazz] tree grows by eradicating White supremacy and providing nourishment for future blossoms to emerge” (2022, 4). As current jazz dancers, we can move forward equitably and powerfully.

Confronting and Moving Past White Supremacy in Jazz Dance

To move forward progressively as jazz dance artists and educators, confronting systemic racism is necessary to realize that within a White-dominant society, African American cultural practices have been appropriated, suppressed, and denied for European-American culture—predominantly presenting as White–-to assert their ways of life as superior and for monetary gain. Lindsey Guarino, professor of music, theater, and dance at Salve Regina University, in her essay “Whiteness and the Fractured Jazz Dance Continuum,” stresses that even the notion that someone like Jack Cole is deemed the father of jazz dance “says more about the systems that privilege White people and the internalized biases that cloud the perception” (2022, 59). This predilection towards superiority is so insidious that it often goes undetected, especially in people who do not explicitly feel hatred towards Black people. DiAngelo observed, “If, however, I understand racism as a system into which I was socialized, I can receive feedback on my problematic racial patterns as a helpful way to support my learning and growth” (2018, 4). Guarino explains the complication in jazz dance since it “was colonized from the moment it was first enacted by White bodies” (2022, 49). She provides insightful feedback specifically targeted to alert White jazz practitioners like me.

Guarino attests to how choreographers in the mid-twentieth century “positioned ballet at the forefront of the jazz form” and “stripped” it of its “aesthetic groundings” (2022, 49). The jazz-ballet blend was taught throughout studios “with teachers perpetuating the myth that ballet is the foundation of jazz technique” (2022, 58). Before researching jazz dance history, I never questioned this myth. I took many ballet classes to cross-train for what we called jazz since the styles required me to stabilize multiple turns and suspend high extensions and jumps while forming long lines through my body. George pointed out that focusing on jazz beyond the notion that ballet is its foundation “takes nothing away from the contributions of the architects of ballet and modern-influenced theatrical and concert jazz dance” (2022, 24). I would add that what it does is reveal an opportunity for new jazz innovations to develop by applying African aesthetic traditions. The perspectives of current jazz scholars asserting African American contributions and conceptualizing the African aesthetic traditions of jazz demonstrate that there is much more to explore in jazz dance beyond the ballet-based jazz styles I trained in.

As I renew my relationship with jazz and re-root my praxis in the essential African traditions from which it developed, I often ask myself ‘how I am different from the White choreographers before me who were responsible for the cultural appropriation of African American vernacular jazz dance.’ To guide this inquiry, I look to current jazz dance scholars, including editors Lindsey Guarino, Carlos R.A. Jones, and Wendy Oliver, who provide antiracist guidance in a recent collection of essays called Rooted Jazz: Africanist Aesthetics and Equity in the Twenty-First Century. They boldly responded to the outcry of racism in the field. As such, they are a vital resource for informing socially responsible

efforts in jazz praxis. Indeed, the editors promised to "honor the African American experience and essence of jazz in every way possible" (2022, 17).

Their antiracist mission is reflected through the multiple contributors incorporating vernacular jazz dance practices and social justice values. All serve to redirect artistic choices and scholarly conversations within jazz dance courses, rehearsals, and performances. Lastly, as Guarino stipulated, "To be White and dance jazz today, requires humility, empathy, and a shift of consciousness to interrupt conventions reflecting Whiteness rather than jazz" (2022, 59). Though I will naturally reflect varying degrees of my heritage in my artistic expressions, I can begin to interrupt past patterns of appropriation and dominance by reckoning with the true history of jazz dance, honoring its African roots, and accepting that ballet is not the foundation of jazz dance.

Embodiology® and My Artistic Awakening

Here I will share part of my journey of learning basic principles of improvisation that I attempt to apply in my practice and exposure to the possibility of improvised choreography not centered on ballet-based styles. Before working on the first thesis project, I spent the summer researching and training in Wray's improvisation methods. Her invitation 'to expand' took me to Greeley, Colorado, where I participated in her week-long intensive for Embodiology®.[22] There I gained a powerful insight into the foundation of improvisation based on concepts she created as a result of studying performance in Ghana and their sacred and communal way of living. My brief exposure to the vast Ghanaian way of life has influenced this research. Nonetheless, I confirm my position as an outsider

[22] https://www.embodiology.com.

influenced by their sacred and complex value system. From Embodiology®, two main principles stood out: "The Ewe Concept of Three" and "Fractal Code." I will provide some context of my perspective before the workshop, essential details of what my mind was opened to during it and reflect on how my jazz praxis was impacted.

Before attending the workshop, I expected to learn the art of improvisation for creating new jazz dance steps and styles. However, I did not expect to see how these improvisations could build up to entirely improvised choreographic compositions. During an exercise titled "The Ewe Concept of Three," Wray divided us into two groups of dancers, and we took turns performing improvisation for each other. The instructions within each group were to mirror another dancer simultaneously, take turns leading and following, and embody the movement of a third dancer. As the audience, I witnessed five dancers perform. From there, they were at liberty to move around the entire stage, while the musicians also had the task of allowing the movement to influence their melodies and rhythm. I saw the African aesthetic traditions embodied in action and not only realized the potential for them to be applied to a new praxis of dance but to foster a harmonious and diverse dance community (my greater goal).

The dancers and musicians embodied the connection to self and others through breath—a critical concept that Wray initially ingrains. As they inhaled and exhaled in various harmonies, they connected on a fundamental level of shared humanity. Wray instructed the musicians to tune into the dancers' movement and allow it to influence the sounds and tempos of their instruments. First, the dancers moved slowly in close proximity while musicians provided a basic rhythm and more ambient sound. Though we had no

context for applying a literal meaning, the nature of their movement interactions showed the qualities of caring and yearning for one another.

Eventually, their kinetic passion burst into larger movements that propelled them across the stage. The musicians and dancers mirrored and inspired each other in a constant reciprocal exchange. They all seemed to expand and contract with faster rhythmic intensity until a climax was reached. Then, all participants mutually released into a calmer mode with slower movements and softer drumming. Finally, the dancers settled into moments where the dancers leaned on one another, sometimes causing one to lift momentarily off the ground while lying on another's back. Even so, they never lost a connection to the rhythm while doing so. Both elements of sharing body weight and maintaining a unified rhythm were in harmony. At last, they all naturally concluded.

During another exercise called "Fractal Code," I found myself defaulting to the habitual rote of steps that I learned from salsa dancing, which Wray discouraged. She explained that when I find myself in those types of habitual moments, to break it down into smaller fractions of movement and deeply investigate each part by itself. From that, I pondered applying the same technique to the theatrical jazz dance I trained in. I imagined a possible way to repurpose my years of training, sectioning codified jazz into pieces and expanding them through my jazz practice with Wray's principle of "Fractal Code." Engaging with my jazz practice with these two principles, I became more able to decenter my formative training in jazz dance from a research-to-choreography foundation strongly influenced by Ghanaian principles under Wray's custodianship. Embodiology®, which centers on human communication, showed me a gateway to understanding what improvisation with live musicians and a harmonious community can be.

African Aesthetic Traditions of Jazz Dance

My socially responsible approach to choreographing focuses on prioritizing the African aesthetic traditions of jazz dance (the roots). I identified these as aesthetic values, and to test my capacity to stride towards a decolonized approach, I created a pedagogical container to put some of these traditions into operation. Guided by the jazz dance manifesto of Wray, I understand that "Jazz dance is centered on four principles derived from an African aesthetic: rhythmicity, a formidable relationship with the music, improvisation, and dynamic play" (2014, 12). Below, I have gathered descriptions of these aesthetics from the multiple resources that address jazz dance traditions, adding individuality and a strong sense of community to the list. Most of the reviewed literature nods to these traditions with variations and elaborations. Notably, my attempt to isolate and define each component carries irony, for they are constantly at play with each other in an auditory and somatic symphony of cause and effect. Therefore, there will often be inferences regarding several components throughout each explanation.

Live Music

First and foremost, include a live band in all practice sessions (referred to as "jazz labs") to create jazz music and dance through a living dialogue. Wray asserts that jazz dance must thoroughly connect to jazz music in a two-way conversation. "Musicians' technique and feelings inform this creative act" (2014, 13). The musicians have an understanding of jazz knowledge which informs the dance practice. A particular West African tradition associates this relationship with the origins of creation. For the Fajulu, a small population near Juba in South Sudan, Africa, "even the origin of humankind is inextricably linked with dance and music" (Malone 1996, 9). The live "audial-somatic"

pulse (the connection between what is heard and felt by musicians and dancers) inspires dynamic movement and the quality of the instruments' sounds. Just as the dancers at times mirror and contrast each other in movement, so do the musicians within their band through inner dialogues between instruments. The effect is the simultaneous isolation of different musical notes and rhythms made visible by discrete parts of the dancers' bodies, combining to display polyrhythmic movement. In addition, they create interest through definite pauses to suddenly punctuate a moment, improvisation, and spontaneous creations of complex movement.

Improvisation

The following essential ingredient in my expanded jazz praxis is improvisation. As Malone puts it, "Improvisation, an additive process, is a way of experimenting with new ideas; that mindset is Africa's most important contribution to the Western Hemisphere" (Malone 1996, 33). Constant polyrhythmic experimental explorations will be the core of the practice. Moreover, the success of improvisation depends on "mastery of the nuances and the elements of craft called for by the idiom" (Malone 1996, 34). These "nuances" are achieved by inhabiting a solid connection to music and "phrase" (basic steps and sequence of movement). The legendary Herbie Hancock's Jazz Institution defines the "form" of jazz music as "all the chords of the tune in a predetermined sequence,"[23] which provides unity (community), while the improvisation brings personal style (individuality). While engaged with movement sequences, the dancers will center a felt response to the music, and the associated moves reverberate from the accompanying music. Notably, jazz musicians improvise in the same way. These experiences, as Pat Taylor in "The Duality of Black

[23] https://hancockinstitute.org retrieved May 1, 2023.

Experience as Jazz Language," states, "give voice to shared lived experiences" (2022, 142). Above all, improvisation amplifies their communal experience. It is the fertile ground for the African aesthetics of jazz dance to emerge and the means through which one can decenter theatrical jazz.

Polyrhythm

I use polyrhythm as a primary aesthetic driver. Jazz prioritizes musical polyrhythm. Wray affirms in her dissertation "Towards Embodiology: Modelling Relations between West African Performance Practices, Contemporary Dance Improvisation and Seselelame" she clarifies, "This is distinctly different in contemporary dance improvisation practice where music is not a primary driver" (2017, 42). Though jazz dance improvisation allows for freedom of expression, there is still a tight adherence to units of time from which polyrhythmic expression develops. Carlos R. A. Jones, African American artist and educator in "Riding Rhythms and Designing Space," claims, "Rhythm is my unifier" (2022, 128). He uses it as the "base layer" of his "choreographic canvas," from which he devises "phrases constructed out of movement" (2022, 128-130). The rhythm becomes a home base that gives a sense that the dancing belongs together, even as individuals might be dancing different moves.

Individuality

Individuals add to the conversation within jazz dance improvisation by bringing unique embellishments, interpretations, variations, and styles. Nevertheless, it is also part of the African aesthetic for the individual dancing to relate to the whole group. The phrase of movement might be repeated, but how it is repeated becomes the individualized part of

the dance that, like snowflakes, is never the same twice. The original dancers and musicians of natal jazz "pushed the evolution of their forms along through improvisation and competition, constantly searching for freedom and originality." Malone emphasized that "they wanted to play it, sing it, dance it differently each time" (1996, 37). She quotes Duke Ellington, "True jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group" (1996, 33). Individuality is distinguished as such within the context of the community. Their position is to maintain and expand on unison phrases or a family of movement, with a constant connection to the music and community. By doing so, they flourish. I intend to expound upon these ideas in my experimental practice.

Community

Another integral and energizing component of the central traditions of rooted jazz dance is the community. To further understand the African connection, Wray refers to "Margaret Drewal, who has done ethnographic research into performance in Nigeria, (who) translates the Yorúbà term Etutu simultaneously to mean 'serious play, investigation, and improvisation'" (2014, 15). Wray instructs that the "constant fascination with the aesthetic values" of jazz dance serve to "stir the emotions of all of the participants, who then further feed into its creative realization" (2014, 15). The community engages and challenges one another through a shared love for jazz. Malone elaborates,

> Each true jazz moment…springs from a contest in which each artist challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents (like the successive canvases of a painter) a definition of his identity; as individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition (1996, 33).

Research Approach

My research approach engages with real-time "knowing" or sensing the next best action or choice. In philosopher Donald Schon's seminal book The Reflective Practitioner, he best describes my process for creative lab work, "that our knowing is our action" (1984, 49). The action of my "knowing" is visible in the documented plans I created before the session and written reflections afterward. Lastly, I utilized Zoom to record work sessions, an iPhone to record the dances as they neared completion, and meetings with the musicians.

Conclusion

To build my creative practice, I will apply "Fractal Code" and "Ewe Concept of Three" from Embodiology® and five (of many) African aesthetic traditions of jazz: live music, improvisation, polyrhythm, individuality, and community.[24] From these techniques and traditions, along with the currents of theatrical jazz and concert dance influences that still run through me, I propose performances that developed from implementing this praxis. Finally, using these aesthetic values, I will track when I engaged each technique, tradition, and definition to demonstrate how these ideas shaped my artistic process. This new awareness of jazz's origins, traditions, and shift in my position as a White artist has prepared me to create a socially responsible jazz praxis.

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[24] The African aesthetic traditions of jazz are also all part of Embodiology®. Improvisation is arrived at through its principles which are practiced as a community. "Dynamic Rhythm," the core of Wray's approach, is the meta-generator of the entire enterprise.

Working Definitions

Term	Definition
African Aesthetic Traditions of Jazz Dance	Though the list is vast, my research focus is on live music, improvisation, polyrhythm, individuality, and community
Conversation	the audial-somatic dialogue that happens between dancers and musicians in all directions
Jazz Labs	a rehearsal or practice session to experiment and collaborate between dancers and musicians to devise jazz dance and music
Phrases	a pattern or sequence of steps and moves that become a base from which the dancers improvise
Movement Puzzles	(Wray's concept from Embodiology® 2022) layers of instructions for the dancers and musicians to solve through responsive movement and sound
Vamping	Allowing for a particular repetitive movement where there is an open amount of time for it to exist, especially as one section transitions into another (vamping, according to Columbia University's Center for Jazz Studies, is a "repeated chord progression or rhythmic figure leading either into or out of a tune or composition")

CHAPTER IV: Practice to Research

In this chapter, I will describe how I implemented a step towards a decolonized jazz dance praxis[25] by sharing my observations and experiences of employing the methodology outlined in the previous chapter. I aimed to center my artistic process inspired by concepts from Embodiology® and the *African Aesthetic Traditions of Jazz Dance* that created natal jazz dance, as laid out in the methodology. All were implemented to decenter my formative practice and fully value and respect African aesthetic traditions. In addition, I was also influenced by the knowledge of the musicians. These elements will be woven into the descriptions of using them for the *Jazz Labs* and their two culminating theatrical performances.

In addition to the methodology, the theatrical influences[26] that I maintain from previous experience are directorial sensibilities, an intuitive sense of performing a story, and collaboration with theatrical designers in lighting, costuming, and stage management. Below, using the working definitions, I describe how the methodology was implemented in both projects and provide outcomes thereof.

Setting Up Jazz Labs

Prior to starting the *Jazz Labs,* I sought musicians, dancers, studio space, and planning for musical movement experiments. I met with Matthew Nelson (saxophonist)

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[25] I intended to take steps toward freeing the Western sphere of jazz dance activity from the influences and attitudes associated with a colonizing people's social and cultural effects (see definition of "decolonize" in chapter 1, page 1).

[26] My theatrical influences consist of African and Eurocentric influences, deserving of an analysis that is outside of the scope of this thesis.

and Isabella Pepke (cellist) from UCI. We brainstormed on how to improvise with dancers informed by their jazz music knowledge, *African Aesthetic Traditions of Jazz Dance,* and Wray's methodologies and exercises. Starting in September 2022, we set up a *Jazz Lab* practice in UCI's dance studios and selected dancers and musicians to participate (note, most of the cast was different for the second project). We met for two hours most Mondays during the 2022-2023 academic year, and I documented sessions through Zoom recordings and post-lab reflective writing. The *Jazz Labs* culminated in two productions: New Slate 2022 and Dance Escape 2023. Throughout each section in this chapter, I give examples of how I implemented each aesthetic tradition and principle by highlighting exercises and observations thereof for each production, including their culminating performances. Through these *Jazz Labs*, with the dancers, musicians, and myself, we have the means to engage with the experiments and collectively decide what is working or not by verbal communication and shared enthusiasm for successful moments (or lack thereof).

Live Jazz Music

The musicians[27] played a vital role as collaborators, for they already embodied knowledge of the tradition of jazz music. They taught us how, within forms, they use sequences of chords and progressions to improvise, a method that inspired creating *Phrases* for the dancers to improvise. Just as chords and progressions directed their musical improvisations, which created songs, I mirrored the idea with short P*hrases* that

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[27] UCI Alum: Matthew Nelson (co-leader and co-composer, tenor sax, percussion); Isabella Pepke (co-leader, co-composer, cello, percussion), Spencer Pepke (percussion, guitar).

UCI Students: Maddox Eckert (drumset, New Slate production only), Johnny Martinez (drumset), Joseph Nguyen (piano, Dance Escape production only), Alejandro Paredes (piano/electric keyboard, New Slate production only), Brennan Sakata (bass).

progressed through stage directions that shaped choreography. The band was selected by Matthew Nelson, leader and co-composer of the music (along with Isabella Pepke). The group consisted of the tenor saxophone, cello, grand piano/keyboard, bass, and a small drum kit (for the second project, we added auxiliary instruments: rainstick, egg-shaker, and conga drums).

The first few *Jazz Labs* were filled with various experiments. For example, I had the musicians pair up individually with one dancer at a time. They practiced taking turns playing and dancing, embodying each other's expressions as if they were having a *Conversation*. Wray visited during an early session and advised having them reflect on what happens within a spoken or written sentence with punctuation marks like commas, periods, or exclamation points to help them clarify their conversational exchange. She also encouraged the use of pauses to accentuate certain rhythms. These instructions helped the musicians and dancers be more responsive to each other's contributions.

Moreover, the surprising variations of speed and pauses in motion created fascinating asymmetrical shapes resulting from the suddenly stopped motion of spinal undulation and hip rotation. The musicians, too, reported a surprising and desirable effect during soloing moments. Since the dancers were choosing when to trade places, the length of the musicians' soloing was different than what is traditionally practiced, thus creating an enjoyable and innovative structure.[28] During everyone's somatically musical *Conversations*, I observed their enthusiasm elevated, faces flushed, and artistry blossoming. They carried the experiences learned from this call-and-response exercise into the rest of the work. In

[28] The musicians reported that soloing in jazz music is highly codified. Having the dancers lead this section caused abrupt interruptions to their usual patterns juxtaposed with longer than normal lengths for any given solo. The result of breaking the norms were delightful and surprising musical effects.

addition, the musicians offered feedback based on their understanding of jazz music. For example, they informed the dancers to always move "on purpose" within an improvisation to avoid looking off. Another advised only performing every third idea in their mind to enhance articulation. Finally, the musicians and dancers retained a dialogic exchange that remained fundamental and constant in all *Jazz Labs*.

Live music catalyzed at least fifty percent of the collaborative relationship through camaraderie, musical vibrations from the instruments, shared passion, spontaneous creativity, joy, and breath. The direct interplay between musicians and dancers enhanced a social spirit that is the core of jazz dance and the African-inspired aesthetic. Wray spotlights how the creative input of the musicians informs creative movement, "a gift to the jazz dancer" (2014, 13). The vitality of the dancers' improvised performances increased with live music, making the work complex and sophisticated. Finally, in these studio sessions, we leaned closer to an African aesthetic by composing jazz choreography that centers on a community with musicians and possibly cultivated fertile ground for decolonized jazz to flourish. I cannot stress enough how transformative it has been working with these talented musicians. Wray's body of work, including Embodiology®, opened the gateway to work with live music.

Improvisation and Movement Puzzles

Here I delve into the process of creating two jazz dance compositions from improvisation to performance through active experimentation, layered instructions, and unending exploration of a dialogue between dancers and musicians. Within my plans, each week, I imagined new *Movement Puzzles* to experiment with, comprised of layers of

movement and musical directions that built a complex problem to be solved through music and movement.

When something emerged from the solved *Movement Puzzles* that added to the musical *Conversation* and was asymmetrically shaped while making a compelling, moving sculpture, I asked the dancers to memorize the basic stage directions and layers of instruction for the improvisation that achieved the aesthetic. Nevertheless, each time, I asked them to continue exploring different musically responsive movement options each time they danced. Therefore, improvisation was constant even as I set stage directions.

My Directions

After two to four *Jazz Labs* for each production, I applied minimal over-arching stage directions to solidify where the improvisational dances would exist on the stage. First, we established where the audience was, then approximated where the band would set up in relation to the dancers' performance. Each section comprised the layers of instructions that informed their improvisations. The stage directions dictated where they danced each section in the space or stage, which improv prompt they would perform, and when, along with the locomotive pattern for each transition.

Even though the movement was always open to exploration, their interpretations began to settle into repetitive movement patterns that looked similar each time they danced the piece. Yet, because they were still improvising, no two performances were precisely the same, and there were often delightful surprises. Due to the predictable way the patterns of dance and music settled; the final pieces appeared to be set choreography.[29]

[29] "The Jazz Treatment" participated in the American College Dance Association Baja 2023 (ACDA). During the feedback session, the adjudicators debated whether "The Jazz Treatment" was choreographed or improvised,

Yet, because the dancers and musicians were improvising within their respective forms, there were different variations of movement and music with each run.

After seven *Jazz Labs* during the Fall quarter of 2022, "The Jazz Treatment" went into production in New Slate at the Claire Trevor Theatre during the first week of December 2022. For the fall project, I had five musicians and six dancers. Eventually, these *Movement Puzzles* resolved the entire piece with their respective musical forms. In other words, with the musicians, we established a predictable length of music that the dancers could memorize and replicate the stage directions within. However, they also have flexible transitions where the length of music could adjust to allow for timing variations due to the work's improvisatory nature (also known as Vamping).

The overall aesthetic of each section took shape, and the spacing became set, which prepared the piece to transition to the stage, making it possible for the lighting designer to specify cues. Designing this way allowed me and the rest of the creative team to produce a cohesive performance. Nevertheless, the performance adhered to the stage directions and improvisational structures, providing the context from which they were free to play. Therefore, the choreography was never danced the same way twice since the staged improvisations were re-investigated each time. The dancers, musicians, and audience members (who saw it multiple times) reported how they enjoyed the experience of "The Jazz Treatment" each time it was performed. The dancers expressed a sense of liberty because each time could differ according to their mood.

My piece could be compared to a form. For musicians, the form (as mentioned in the methodology) is a musically charted plan of chords, progressions, and sequences to be

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they decided it was choreographed, which, according to the musicians, is the highest compliment you can receive as a jazz improviser.

played. The form is what is heard as a song. However, because the notes are not set, how it is played varies each time. In retrospect, I realize there is a potential for me to understand the form thoroughly and apply its meaning to movement. Perhaps I could then reduce how many stage directions I use and rely more on the expansive skills of jazz music improvisation.

Polyrhythm

As defined in previous chapters, Polyrhythm refers to multiple centers of rhythm performed simultaneously, either in the dance or music. Since I have already discussed the pedagogy for polyrhythm in previous sections, "Live Jazz Music" and "Improvisation," here I will focus more on the process and outcomes during each of the two projects. For "The Jazz Treatment," I auditioned dancers by asking them to do a polyrhythmic improvisation to "Water No Get Enemy" by Fela Kuti. The selected dancers demonstrated an advanced level of polyrhythm, isolation of body parts, and individuality within their improvisation, involving recognizable movements from hip-hop, Latin dance, popping, and contemporary ballet. We continued developing improvisation skills throughout the *Jazz Labs* with the first cast, as highlighted in the sections "Live Jazz Music" and "Improvisation." In addition, they continued to hone in on their abilities to converse with the musicians, making the rhythms and contrasts clearly visible. I argue that the dancers' and musicians' level of excellence in these polyrhythmic skills was the main attraction of "The Jazz Treatment." That is why I deflected much of the praise credited to me from viewers, for I realized that what the people were enjoying came from the cast's talent enhanced by my sense of compositional placement along with design elements. We were indeed a collaborative group.

For "Gems," the second and final project, my minimal ability with polyrhythm and its pedagogy became pronounced. In addition, I encountered the challenge of achieving polyrhythm and the jazz aesthetic by underestimating the value of even the simplest *Phrases*. Throughout the winter of 2023, the cast of twelve dancers, who, for the most part, were not vastly skilled in polyrhythmic improvisation, had the task of learning it from me (who is also new to learning how to teach its value). However, in moments when we succeeded at delivering and following the same dancer to music directions (as noted in previous sections), the results were fascinating. For instance, a collective sense of polyrhythm was sometimes created through the spontaneous ways various dancers slowed or stopped their motion during minimally structured improvisations. My eye would pull to the slowed or halted dancer while also experiencing the music accented by other dancers in the periphery (evenly, twice as fast, or half the time). Thus, the multiple centers of rhythm existed momentarily across the community. This rhythmic aesthetic happened when most dancers remembered to pause, stop, converse, and contrast the music—vital to polyrhythmic improvisation.

The second challenge became most pronounced during the last section of "Gems." I was concerned that if I were to provide a *Phrase* of simple steps, it would shift the piece into something like traditional musical theater ensemble choreography. Instead, I wanted to be innovative, leaving room for them to grow in improvisational exploration. Therefore, I set general stage directions for them to move through freely. For example, for the third section, I divided the group into two and had one group dance in an elliptical rotation across the front of the stage while the other did the same in the back. Then, on a specific musical cue, each group was to switch spots. Unfortunately, the outcome was too chaotic

due to the many dance moves that did not unify enough to reflect the music being played. Though each dancer moved beautifully, without a unifying *Phrase*, their individual artistry got lost within the community.

Reflectively, I speculated that the work would have benefited from installing simple *Phrases* to explore through improvisation—that is, jazz. For example, I could have given them a short *Phrase* of two slow walks, three fast walks, and two kick-ball-changes (basic tap step). In retrospect, I realized it would have been more effective to limit the dancers to basic steps before expanding to embrace improvisation within the scope of their range. Rhythmic unity would have been achieved by having them adhere to the basic steps while still allowing for an 'appropriate' individual expression that relates to the whole. Instead, I instructed them to do 'any' movement as long as they were rhythmically syncopated, which was not ideal for a large cast of dancers who were not all necessarily skilled in doing so. I learned that the rigor of rhythmically informed creativity requires much more skill-building for it to be a real value and not an external idea.

Nevertheless, the result was a beautiful work that held some *African Aesthetic Traditions of Jazz Dance;* however, overall did not emanate a cohesive aesthetic of jazz dance. There were fascinating moments of rhythmic innovation that exceeded my expectations from dancers who were not readily skilled in polyrhythmic dance. I saw much growth in the way that they conversed with the musicians. One modern dancer reported how they initially did not understand how to connect to the music. However, with the pedagogy offered by the musicians and me, this individual (and others) could grasp the concept and truly understood how to have a *Conversation* with them. The dancer's understanding was evident when comparing their performance to when they started the

project. Moreover, because of the unconventional way they twisted through the movement, they created exciting shapes and articulations not typically seen in dancers trained in jazz or hip hop. Other modern dancers paralleled this person's development. I also witnessed ballet dancers (who are not used to punctuated rhythm with their bodies) develop accents and articulations in exciting ways. As time passed, these articulations became more sophisticated and complex, drawing interest to them as they performed.

These findings imply a strong need to strengthen my pedagogy and allow more time for polyrhythmic training before creating a project (unless they are already trained). As a result of these findings, my next step in my jazz praxis is to hone my pedagogical skills further to guide the dancers more effectively toward a jazz aesthetic. To do so, I will further train as a polyrhythmic improviser, study jazz music terminology, research more choreographers already implementing similar praxis, and continue creating pieces within the jazz praxis established by this thesis.

Inspiration from Wray's Embodiology®

For both pieces, I incorporated the inspired idea of decolonizing theatrical jazz dance. I engaged with this concept by breaking down the steps and styles of my formative training into pieces to be explored just as I did with the "Fractal Code" concept in Wray's Embodiology®. As I understood it, the difference was that she asked us to innovate original movement based on breath and connection to our bodies "in the moment" without exactly

replicating codified steps.[30] In comparison, I am intentionally inserting previous training by dismantling it into fractions to be used as a *Phrase*.

What I gleaned from her approach is that with the piece of movement, we can explore many ways to vary all or part of it based on present-time feelings and kinesthetic sense. For example, in the first section of "The Jazz Treatment," I used a locomotive series of steps to a set traveling rhythmic structure (commonly found in theatrical jazz) that moves through space; however, they had to improvise how their limbs, torso, and head articulated throughout the steps. Then, while returning to their starting position, they were to improvise back on syncopated gallops,[31] or chassés (French ballet term meaning "to chase"). Notably, they defaulted to performing the steps with a traditional ballet aesthetic which sent energy out into long extended lines and vertical jumps, as typically seen with the ballet step called "jeté coupé" –which reduced the grounded, rhythmic feeling of jazz. However, they adjusted beautifully to the jazz aesthetic once I pointed out their unconscious default.

At first, when they started improvising this *Movement Puzzle*, they were humorously confused as they tried to figure out who was dancing with them next. After a few weeks, they were still not clear, and, with time running out, I got anxious and tempted just to set it with exact stage directions. Luckily, I did not follow through with my fear. With just a little more time, they fell into a conversational pattern of playfully interacting with one another, connecting to the music, and exploring a grounded version of the traveling rhythmic steps while leaning closer to a jazz aesthetic. Moreover, the set staging developed based on how

[30] Later in my research, I came to understand that in Embodiology® Fractals actually refer to known information (a distinctive shape/movement/rhythm/step) that exists and is a shared understanding between performers. Fractals are repetitions that scale, maintaining an essence of the original form.

[31] A common step in social dances.

they solved the *Movement Puzzle* of finding somebody new to dance with each time they improvised the *Phrase*. Using theatrical jazz dance as the *Phrase* from which the dancers improvise decenters undifferentiated replicated movement and allows dancers to explore movement possibilities endlessly.

During the beginning stages of each project, I instructed the dancers to mirror each other similarly to the "Ewe Concept of Three"; however, it was not applied as comprehensively as in Embodiology®. As a result, I found myself not relating strongly to the concept and instead created my own directions based on outcome (often spontaneously during *Jazz Labs*). For example, when the dancers defaulted to using their arms too much, I directed them to focus on isolating other body parts. When they remembered, the directions effectively created a stronger jazz aesthetic.

Community in Development

In this tool, my first two chapters directly come into play and answer my question: how can I draw on African aesthetic traditions with social responsibility? For each project, I contextualized jazz tradition by sharing its history and communal value. I acknowledge that the conversation, as with the aesthetic traditions, is too vast to detail in our short time. Nevertheless, I took moments to build reverence by illuminating how jazz got to me and how I intend to return my praxis to one meant to make rich and inclusive communal experiences within the *Jazz Labs* (and hopefully beyond). We developed a closing ritual to revere all that came before us, all that will come, and to replenish ourselves.[32] In addition, I taught them a pre-show tradition of pointing our right hand into a single spot (around

[32] Inspired by Duniya Dance and Drum class in Alan Terricciano's Music for Dancers course at UCI 2023. https://www.humanities.uci.edu/events/community-dance-workshop-duniya-dance-and-drum.

waist level), thus creating spokes on a wheel. I announce that "we are better," then I push and curve my hand inwards, causing all to follow suit before saying "together." The collective shape is that of our diverse hands coiled harmoniously. Then we lift our hands as I wish them a great performance. We all cheered.

The artists truly enjoyed the process, as evidenced by dancing and playing during their water breaks when they typically would have been checking their phones! During our short breaks, the dancers and musicians often opted not to rest. Instead, they spontaneously jammed together (without any prompting on my part), trying out new melodies and somatic responses. Wray's concept of "serious-play" (2014, 15) rang true throughout our journey. When the artists genuinely invested in the work, the rigor came from a sense of play, not forced discipline. I understood these methods worked best when the dancers had time to explore different solutions. I had to allow the creative process to prevail over hurrying to a final product.

For each technical rehearsal and performance that followed the *Jazz Labs*, the artists were to continue exploring possibilities within the set directions and share the stage as a social experience as opposed to a "put on" performance. Notably, Duke Ellington, the legendary jazz music pioneer, declared that "jazz is a feeling," I shared that inspirational quote with everyone going into the technical rehearsals and performances to encourage them to continue building their jazz artistry with every run. The community of dancers and musicians continuously affirmed how much they looked forward to Jazz Labs and their respective performances, and I sensed a friendly bond between all of us. When the second project was over, there were even tears of joy. I confirm that this is the community I sought to build.

Summary of The Final Thesis Project

Though I have interjected outcomes for the second (final project) in previous sections, I will gather observations on the process and outcome for my final thesis performance here. For "Gems," I followed the model of "The Jazz Treatment" by implementing *Movement Puzzles* to give a basic shape and design to each section of the composition; however, this time, I was working with a more stylistically diverse cast which created a new challenge regarding rhythmic expression as mentioned in the section "Polyrhythm." Nonetheless, they all specialized in different dance styles, including modern, ballet, contemporary, and tap.

As mentioned before, my new challenge was to teach and simultaneously induce a unified syncopated expression with polyrhythmic articulation. Therefore, I created *Movement Puzzles* that could only be solved through syncopated rhythmic expression. For instance, the first section began with the sound of a three-two clave rhythm (three evenly spaced percussive sounds, followed by two faster ones), and the dancers were only to move on the sound while they isolated body parts. They were also limited by lying on the floor at various angles, acting as though the feet and hands were attached in one spot, which inherently developed asymmetrical and angular movement (elbows and knees mostly bent). The last layer of instruction was to slowly rise and lower back down as the volume and intensity of the drums layered in.

Coaching some dancers to adhere to the rhythm was challenging throughout the process. Some frequently moved out of a relationship with the music without syncopation or ran through the space without making any particular syncopated rhythm visible. Their movement was fascinating; however, it did not render the rhythm visible that was being

heard. For about thirty minutes during the first workshop and intermittently throughout all sessions, I guided them to only move with the clave sounds and be still in between, which helped guide rhythmic expression. In addition, constantly coaching them to listen deeply to and feel the sounds led to moments of success with polyrhythmic improvisation. Overall, the distinction of rhythm was only sometimes evident, and I realized the importance of emphasizing the degree of seriousness necessary to develop this musical artistry.

Interestingly enough, I observed moments of a communal polyrhythm, similar to the outcome explained in the section "Polyrhythm." It appeared by default because some dancers adhered closely to the three-two clavé while others went out of bounds. I became careful about correcting anybody who was not following the original instruction because sometimes their solution was effective in a surprising way. Nevertheless, as time went on and the dancers often forgot to pause or stop to accent the rhythm in the music, it became necessary to remind them more often to achieve something closer to a jazz aesthetic. Even though some remembered from the first time, minimal polyrhythmic expressions tended to get lost within the constant motion of many bodies (as mentioned before). In addition to honing in on polyrhythm, I sometimes asked a dancer to be more subtle before dancing big, which helped maintain a connection between individuality within the community (essential to African traditions).

Throughout the "Gems" project, I developed pedagogy to guide the dancers into a syncopated rhythmic expression in dialogue with the music. For example, during the last section, I often instructed them to suddenly slow down or stop their movement before speeding up; this technique helped visibly punctuate the music, thus creating polyrhythmic movement. The more they adhered to the instructions, the closer we achieved a unifying

rhythmic aesthetic. Nonetheless, the cast as a whole did not maintain the instructions consistently enough to solidify a jazz aesthetic. Ultimately, I discovered that these instructions were adequate. Yet, as with most advanced dance training, gaining excellence and fluency requires much more time for information to settle in and be effective.

Conclusion

Live music as a container for the *Jazz Labs* and performances was integral to driving community relations and shaping the performances. Improvisation allowed for authentic performances based on the dancers' mood and physical state at the moment, which liberated individuality and increased their vitality. My community-centered leadership effectively established bonds, performers' pleasure, freedom of self-expression, and beautiful performances. However, my leadership skills are still being shaped as I ponder how much I can afford to be an authority without diminishing the bonds, personal liberation, and enjoyment experienced by the participants. What I established resulted in outcomes ranging from "highly successful" to "further research needed to investigate." The latter was primarily due to my limited training and experience with polyrhythmic improvisation and developing leadership praxis. Nevertheless, by prioritizing the *African Aesthetic Traditions of Jazz Dance* and subsuming previous training (mine and the dancers) within this context, we experienced a new jazz praxis and blossomed into something fresh, with room to constantly live and grow.

As I reflected on feedback from the musicians throughout this study, I realized that to improve my efficacy, I need to develop a sophisticated understanding of the jazz musicians' skills. During the process, I began to transform my thinking in some of my working definitions of musical terms such as *Phrases and Vamping*. However, there are a

plethora of terms that I was exposed to through working with the band, and I see a possibility of expanding them to make them usable with reference to movement as well. A more complete translation of jazz music terminology into related movement language might empower jazz dancers to articulate their artistry as musicians do. Ultimately, dancers could be as equipped as musicians with the skills to interact and co-create. The living spirit of jazz, one that can unite music, dance, and people, might expand powerfully.

Conclusion

"Jazz is always political 'cuz' it's imagining a future we could share, and how great can that be" ~Thomas F. DeFrantz (Uprooted, The Journey of Jazz Dance 2020)

To approach socially responsible jazz choreography as an outsider to African American culture, I examined how I—as a White artist—could contribute to the conversation between jazz dance and jazz music by bringing attention to less well-understood foundations of the form to the foreground. First, I researched the West African origins of jazz dance and their development through enslavement and legal segregation in the USA. Then, I voiced this history, which has traditionally been truncated, when such information is still threatened by further erasure.[33] In the second chapter, I shared African aesthetic traditions from the point of view of the persistence of African American culture during legal segregation. Further, I showed the significance of what the African American originators of jazz dance had endured while in a subordinate position to legal rights and how that benefited theatrical jazz dance. I openly voiced my complicated history no longer out of guilt,[34] but out of hope that illuminating it would create more freedom for us all. Then, after reckoning with the appropriated history of my formative jazz dance training, I considered what decolonized jazz dance means. Finally, I deliberated how I might move

[33] Florida Gov.Ron DeSantis rejected a course on African American studies. https://www.npr.org/2023/01/27/1151725129/florida-advanced-placement-african-american-studies-backlash#:~:text=Florida's%20department%20of%20education%2C%20under,and%20even%20a%20potential%20lawsuit.

[34] I originally harbored much guilt while reckoning with African American history and systemic racism in the wake of Floyd's murder. Over time, I came to understand that holding onto the guilt is not conducive to healing. To move forward, I released guilt and boldly faced the truth of our American history, my position in it, and dedicated my practice to healing the destruction that still plays out. My original thesis topic, before delimiting, had to do with "healing jazz."

towards it by decentering my formative training in theatrical jazz dance and developing a praxis based on African aesthetic traditions.

In response to my calling to decenter my praxis, I developed a working relationship with musicians to create performance jazz art collaboratively. As a part of the new practice, I drew on concepts from Embodiology® and the core African traditions that innovated jazz in the first place. Then, I took theatrical jazz steps from my formative training and immersed them into the African aesthetic traditions of live music, improvisation, polyrhythm, individuality, and community. I not only identified these principles, traditions, and structures as understood in African American culture but built a community within the rehearsal space where we improvised off basic steps and danced directly to live music. I encouraged exploration, playfulness, and call-and-response but did not ask anybody to replicate any particular movements exactly. Even the few unison moments were not drilled to perfect replication of shape. As a new experience (being an outsider to African Diasporic forms of improvisation as a practice) I note that these slight variances remarkably added a lovely texture while allowing individual and social expression to come into play. Throughout, I learned what worked and did not work in this context. As a result of these experiments, I have become inspired to further my understanding of jazz music terminology to become more effective pedagogically and artistically.

I intended to create a socially inspired dance from groups of dancers and musicians. By doing so, I furthered a de-centered approach from my previous theatrical jazz practice while mainly focusing on African aesthetic traditions. All was done to respect and attribute

African American cultural heritage.[35] Nevertheless, the extent of how well the participants of each project understood and appreciated these complexities is unknown. Lastly, I metaphorically returned theatrical jazz steps and styles by immersing them in the "treatment" of the African aesthetic traditions of jazz as a symbolic gesture of giving back what did not belong to me. I attempted to change how I interact with jazz now to emanate the truth of our American history and the real origins of jazz. By doing so, I hope that informed respect will become standard practice in all the jazz dance spaces I inhabit. Unfortunately, If jazz dance improvisation is practiced by outsiders without infusing the history of African American culture, it too will be consumed as another part of the status quo. And, to foster a more vital social reverence for the African American jazz dance and music that these ideas come from, more time would be needed to discuss, reflect, and analyze the histories and cultural practices with dancers and musicians I work with.

Contrarily, it might be reasonable to borrow and absorb artistic material within mutual social contexts, a topic that needs a more complex conversation beyond the scope of this thesis. However, extracting the "goods" of jazz dance from another culture without regard or consideration for the people from which it came is destructive. As a result of engaging deeply with the literature on jazz dance, I am empowered to attribute jazz art developments in the United States more thoroughly.

The great controversy with my findings is that, inevitably, my own culture comes into play in this research; my background in theatrical and commercial jazz, ballet, and modern dance is still part of how my body of work is shaped. My formative training and experience pattern my thinking and inform my aesthetic concerns. As I lead others to

[35] Notably, we were already richly influenced by Black vernacular dance, as evidenced in Gottschild's research, even when not directly imitating their signature moves from the Jazz Era.

improvise, applying African American traditions of original jazz dance, the standard American movement languages I have trained in my whole life naturally arise. The two trajectories will influence each other as they meet in the studios and on the stages of my jazz praxis. I continually question how I maintain the integrity of the original jazz dance traditions while drawing on my conceptual and embodied memory of previous training, including compositional aesthetic values learned in modern dance choreography courses. Notably, almost all my training is already influenced by African traditions. Nevertheless, I am balancing previous memories of what is "good" in choreography with new ways of appreciating the qualities of an even more African-influenced dance performance.

My research demonstrates that jazz dance thrives within an African-centered aesthetic value system, as shown by my experience of Embodiology® and use of African aesthetic values that created natal jazz which continue to generate new forms. The live jazz music made visible through dance had power because it was auditorily and somatically moving to many immediate witnesses. I deduced this conclusion from the numerous people telling me how much they enjoyed the work, the purely positive feedback from the ACDA adjudicators for "The Jazz Treatment," and an invitation to participate in the Jazz Dance West Conference 2023 hosted at Cal State University, Dominguez Hills.

By bringing together authentically expressed dancing bodies in dialogue with musicians through polyrhythmic improvisation, I participate in making danceable jazz music that honors the African American originators with neither direct imitation nor ignorance of the realities of Black life during the Jazz Era or today. Furthermore, by demonstrating the value of work centered on African-informed aesthetics, I begin to move away from a colonized mindset of theatrical-jazz aesthetics being superior due to their

ballet-based style. Within my work, the larger conversation centers on African traditions, which the ballet-based and modern dance was part of, which might help shape a decolonized future that decenters White aesthetic traditions as superior.

By creating and talking about African-centered jazz art, I hope to begin countering the current systems of racism. Through carving space in our classes and communities to share jazz dance and music—great American art forms—a precedent can be set that informed mutual respect is of the highest value. In addition, we can make visible and revere the treasures that African Diasporic communities carried and cultivated as they miraculously continue to find ways to persevere through grave injustices. From this experimental context, I will find ways to continue this conversation through educational institutions and by bringing social jazz dance events to the public in places we already gather (e.g., a farmer's market). Through jazz dance, I hope to contribute to social well-being and cultural harmony in the communities I serve.

In her final interview, my former mentor, the late Marie de la Palme, expressed how she thought it most fair to share the stage with all dance vernaculars and declared that we must move over for one another.[36] As I made room for a new way of practicing jazz, an exciting world of possibilities was opened: a gateway to integrate dancers of diverse styles and abilities. I hope that many will be inspired to use these methods to connect dancers, musicians, and diverse people within communities throughout our country and world, all the while clearly knowing that these gems came from African Americans and people of African origin.

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[36]https://www.google.com/search?q=marie+de+la+palme+youtube+interview&oq=marie+&aqs=chrome.1.69i59l2j69i57j46i433i512j46i340i433i512l2j69i61l2.5630j0j7&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:caae7ead,vid:oCTaHy4ZFjQ.

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