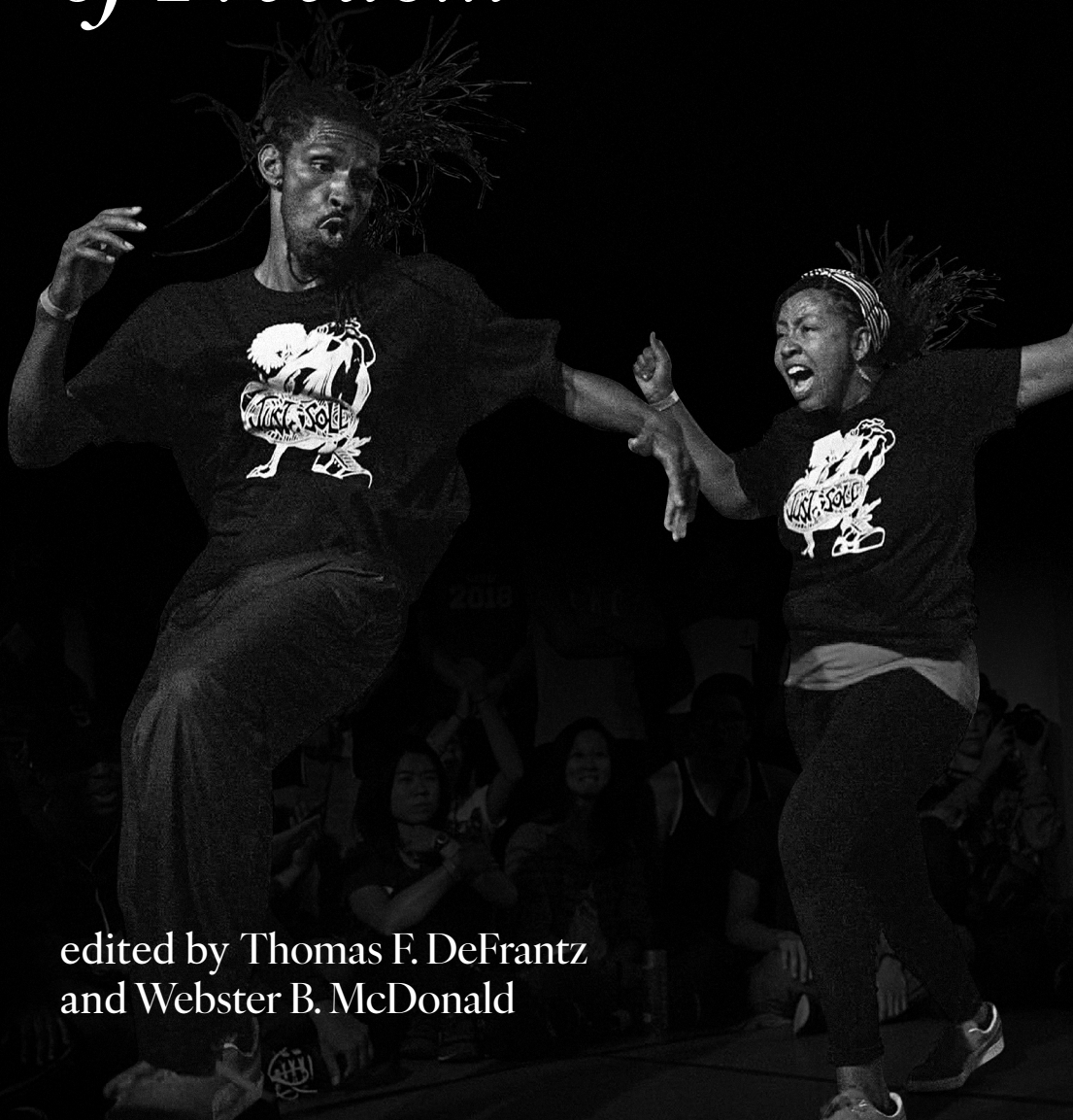


Black Social Dance: Embodied Geographies of Freedom



edited by Thomas F. DeFrantz
and Webster B. McDonald

Black Social Dance: Embodied Geographies of Freedom

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Section I

Dancing a Black Social

October 12-14, 2023

Northwestern University, Chicago IL

convened by Thomas F. DeFrantz



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Introduction

Black Social Dance: Category and Orientation

Thomas F. DeFrantz

Thomas F. DeFrantz directs SLIPPAGE: Performance|Culture|Technology and is Professor at Northwestern University. DeFrantz believes in our shared capacity to do better, and to engage a creative spirit that is anti-racist, proto-feminist, and queer affirming.

What are the terms of Black Social Dance and its movements? First, a question of category. Does naming a thing reproduce a violence; fix something that is essentially wild and beyond categorization, in the ways that Toni Morrison or Duke Ellington deployed those terms? In naming things in order to identify them, are we therefore restricting practices that in fact thrive in quare enfleshment or spiritual connectivities, practices that operate happily outside of the boundaries of language?

Surely, naming Black Social Dance as a particular formation of assembly contains both its effects and possibilities. I've heard and felt this again and again in the gatherings of this project. As researchers share their expertise in the events of dancing we all care towards, a suspicion of containment encircles our conversation and discourse. We are suspicious of being labeled "Black" by outsiders as an identity location, rather than as a breathing multitude that moves sideways and backwards at once; as in Sankofa and Douen multi-dimensionality with dance as a portal to other ways of being. And yet, we love "doing Black" as an action of social and political communion. We groove in the aesthetic impulse to resist being in favor of doing; a movement of action language, as Zora Neal Hurston called it; a performative impulse to wonder with time rather than sit in it, even when that sitting is dancing.

We wonder with time in dancing.

This question of category also helps us think beyond dancing towards an urgent question of orientation. How do we move around a thing that we call Black Social Dance, rather than trying to fix it into a tidy narrative?

Some of us orient through dance more than others, and many Black people do this as a way to wonder with time. We might all try to learn a step and move fast, too; practicing dance as warrior training for urgent fugitive political movements, faster than an eye can see. Thinking of practice as an orientation could be useful to cleave dance into an everyday Blackness of being as well as an exploration of expertise within form. An orientation towards expertise distinguishes all of the researchers who have been involved in this project and the vast communities of Black people dancing, that our research commends.

“Moving around a thing” can offer a way to think through orientation and category. “Around” is the motion by which Black Social Dance surely organizes itself in event. With social dance forms named “the slop,” or “the mess around,” or the practices of the four corners or twerking – each of these called many different things depending on contexts of time and place, at least – we “move around” much more than we arrive in social dance as a structuring logic.

This capacity to move has always been restricted in what we call Black Life; Black Social Dance registers movement as an orientation towards freedom as much as any particular steps or styles. The geography of freedom proposed by this project’s name is a geography of people being able to move.

Many urgent ideas have come forward across the convenings of this project, keeping us busy with questions about an orientation towards Black being-in-time. Why do some social dance formations fade in one Black place, only to emerge as if brand-new somewhere else? Why does it seem as though the dances actually never “go away,” even though they could?

Black Social Dance tells us something about structures of practice that remain across time, even if they go underground and under-practiced for a time. Forgotten,

“Moving around a thing” can offer a way to think through orientation and category.

but not gone, as performance studies researcher Joe Roach offered up in his prelude to *Cities of the Dead*; to be re-engaged in a future cycle with different sounds, different political contexts, different renderings of what constitutes Black queer presence or survival. Black Social Dance

orients us towards presence and survival, calling on moves “dug up from the crates,” as DJs might say.

Black Social Dance offers an archive and repertoire in one, coming into focus or moving around bodies as needed for temporary sustenance. The practices of dancing open simultaneous portals of resistance and affirmation. What happens when we follow those lines of flight rather than anything like naming dances or telling their histories in a sort of nearly-linear cause and effect manner?

The movements of Black Social Dance around and through Black communities wonder with and stabilize time as a movingness made particular with rhythm and gesture. Questions emerge in terms of how to think with context around these dances. Is the dance space sometimes utopian, queer, elaborated, and distinct from everyday life, in the way that some performance-thinkers characterize performance? In this case, does dance operate as a special out-of-time portal that allows form to align across location and historical era? Do we dance to remember and imagine forward, no matter how shitty the world is around us?

And then do we also dance socially to consecrate a here and now, with less regard for a terrible past that produced tiny kinesthetic profiles in dances that can only happen in the tight places of the shotgun house, the temporary takeover of the corner of the nightclub or the school gym, or more often, the rent party? Conversations in this project indicate that Black Social Dance does many things at once, including verifying place and portaling outward.

Most importantly, it seems that analyzing any of our dances becomes a way to write about the dance. How the dance moves becomes a way to write with it. As the dance gesture travels across place, even within a single Black city, it affirms a shared sense of temporary freedom within its practice. The Jit does urgent work to orient Black lives in Detroit, and that work moved into places where erotic exchange corresponds to claims on time and presence. In this, the dancing practice predicts its own analyses no matter the site of performance. This can help us think about how to write so that the dance comes forward into the language, even as it remains urgent to write about when and where the dance enters, and who brings it into being.

Thinking about New Orleans, which by some ridiculous fluke is not one of our sites of study for this project – but how can you think much about Black life without thinking of New Orleans? – we leaned into the idea of the body as transportation. The body as a vehicle for moving spirit and presence, rather than as any sort of identity formation or restrictions of gender, sexuality, disability, and religion. Transport, or moving things around – before and after Katrina or the *Code Noir* – as an episteme of Black life, whether we think of second line as dance or something else. New Orleans reminded us that some kinds of Black social dance don't really travel beyond location in on a larger scale; some aspects of Bgirling in the Bay Area stayed right there in Oakland and Hayward and Richmond rather than becoming a brief global sensation.

This project had originally intended to cut social dance from more performative forms that involve witnesses or audiences watching the dancing, as if in juridical assessment. The project began by being grounded in a belief that competitions and dances prepared for viewing – and that would include improvised structures offered up as demonstrations – could not land in the category of the social that the project would consider. But every gathering, every bit of writing and workshop engaged by researchers in the project has demanded attention to performance as an aspect of sociality. Orientation helps immensely in this, again, because maybe we're thinking with an orientation towards organizing the body in time, rather than the fact of scrutiny or judgment by outsiders to the practice of dance.

The project began as an invitation to think alongside everyday people, rather than professional dancers or choreographers. Rather, we wanted to think with folks who orient with dance, but not only that; people engaged in activities of joyous discovery of their capacity through dance gestures. The project privileged the social as a formation that discouraged virtuosity as an achievement of technique, but rather than the capacity to move things around differently. What if we considered social dancing as something available without rehearsal, but still incredibly juicy and rich with variety and expertise?

The typical constructions of Black Dance as a realm consider social dance, theatrical dance, and dances of spirit as areas of practice distinctive enough to deserve comment. In this formation, theatrical dance is anything witnessed by others who are not dancing, but separate from spirit dancing, which might have witnesses also engaged in spiritual practice, but not concerned with any sort of aesthetic capacity beyond whether the dancing brings the gods. Social dance, then, becomes dancing among others without witness or necessary direction towards spirit.

The three areas of practice overlap and interact, of course, and penetrate each other directly, always. Still, something about a social in this arrangement has to do with the work of resisting scrutiny and the need for Black to be identifiable and particular; as if distinctive from other ways to move.

How do we dance among each other? Two other ways to think of categories of the realm of Black Dance came forward in conversations of this project:

dances that are watched

dances that are connective tissues

In this, we might be moving towards a wondering about “the social” as an aspect of connectivity in many different sorts of idioms.

The project has brought forward other juridical terms of Black life as aspects of dance, as in considering the Chicago and Los Angeles 2013 outlawing of twerking in the schools. We can trace through history any number of similar bans on creative expression including those that led directly to the Stono Rebellion of South Carolina in the 18th century. Congo Square supported dancing until the 19th century; after that dancing moved in New Orleans to certain restricted spaces; and then of course, Second Line grew up to resist those regulations.

If the city offers we Black people in the United States a place where things happen differently, it also creates the pressure cooker that supports a carceral state of exception. Our dancing is policed, heavily and often, even as we continually find ways to avoid the law with our study of imagination as dance practice.



Other questions help our thinking regarding practices of Black Social dance across geographies and time zones. We could wonder, what does genre do? How does genre organize thinking? Does swing dancing encourage a particular sort of world-making that emerges very distinct from, say, vogue femme or locking?

Surely, genre is an aspect of category; so the category of Black Social Dance as an orientation of moving things around in time might encompass particular genres that become a way to mark orientation. Krumping at the queer nightclub orients differently than Krumping might in a streetcorner battle; even as a presentation on social dance in Johannesburg, South Africa, demonstrates movement solidarity with dancing in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

“Who gets to dance Black Social Dance” has also been a lever of thinking with global capital and the “always on” as the nature of Black life in public discourse. When we talk about Black life, we’re always on display, bound to appear, inevitably marked as being of the wake and as outsiders to even a question of “the human,” as if that were a question of time or being. (We all might look forward to a day when we resist a question of “the human” in relation to Black life. This academic formation of placing Black life outside a category of the human can often be tiresome and distracting.) The concerns of appropriation come forward regularly here, in this thinking and practicing together, as Black life does emerge in total relation to global capital – because “blackness” is actually the foundation of global capital. Art is not real estate, and many Black social dancers crave not a lot more than the temporary acknowledgment of the moment when others admire their moves. But as Queen Gabby quipped in our Fall 2023 meeting, you “can’t start driving in the middle of the road.” People who want to do Black Social Dance may show up uninformed and under-committed to an

ethical curiosity about how these genres cohere, and try to start driving these dances without care for the training that goes into moving a big vehicle.

“If you don’t know what it means to be black,” through some sort of study and reflection, then these dances and this orientation towards moving things around in time will hold little value, and you will probably misuse them. Gabby offered, “if you let someone who wasn’t supposed to drive, drive – and they crash ... well, then what ...?” Appropriation and market value show up almost immediately when we dance, even when we dance socially.

Black Social Dance orients toward and through a market, and always in relationship to popular culture formations. So we engage in rituals of preparation to dance that align with a common social logic, one offered up by media whether useful or annoying. But then, ritual is in the social and the sacred, and Black life moves with ritual formations even as we’re getting ready for the sock-hop or the house party. Our relationship to capital is vexed, as it arrives like the character Dana in *Kindred*, as the cultural theorist Denise Ferreira da Silva reminds us in her book *Unpayable Debt*. Dana’s detached arm is left within the walls of her home, bound up by historical actions, including our dancing. And so our relationships to market are complex and messy, and our dancing seems to revere popular culture even as it constantly offers unbridled critique from within – sort of – its structures.

So, then, Black Social Dance might be an orientation towards moving things around. Kemi Adeyemi offered trenchant critique of the entire project in 2023, calling for resistance to the assumptive logics that produce a practice of “Black Social Dance.”

To open lines of desire might be to resist systems of assessment that produce the place of dance or even the place of the social. If we don't need to see the dancing for it to do its work... this proposition came up in relation to how an affective register of social assembly resists technique in genre, when explored broadly across a group of people dancing... maybe this orientation towards moving things around can eventually cohere as a way to express Black being in time. Adeyemi offered that BAD dancing offers a GOOD occasion to think about things that are not learned well. The queers among us are very good at misinterpreting things or doing them intentionally wrong so that something interesting can actually happen. These comments reminded us to wonder, with E. Moncell Durden, "what are we allowed to forget?" and what happens if we forget? People, places, originators of steps or moves – but not the energy that went into making something happen.

Michelle Gibson, priestess and spouse of dance as Black function, reminded us that we don't have a choice. When the gift of dance or creative gesture is given. "The social," Gibson said, "will move on its own."

It will always happen, this moving things around as a way to recognize Black commitment. It is a doing, not a performative. It doesn't represent a way to be in the world, as something we can call Black Social Dance; it is a way to move. So, the researchers in this project move with dance as our guide.

We gather together to wonder and write and hear the stories of the dance.

That's our task here.

To move things around by storytelling, with style and some sense of rhythm.



Can you feel it?



Rhythms of Resilience

Michelle “Mz. G” Gibson

Choreographer, cultural ambassador, healer, professor, mother, and performing artist, Michelle Gibson, also affectionately known as “Mz. G”, received her B.F.A. in Dance from Tulane University and her M.F.A. from Hollins University/American Dance Festival at Duke University. Gibson’s teaching and choreographic practice comprises all genres of the African Diaspora, Contemporary Afro Modern, Afro Funk, Jazz, and her own New Orleans Second Line Aesthetic.

I was born in Independence, Louisiana, a relatively unknown place just outside New Orleans. The city itself raised me. There's something inherently social in the culture of New Orleans, innate to both Black and white New Orleanians. Both communities share a common understanding that socialization is essential to our culture. However, historically, the forms and meanings of socialization differ significantly.

The profound ability of people of African and diasporic descent to socialize without shared spoken language is rooted deeply in our spirits. As a New Orleanian, the rhythms embedded in our speech and daily interactions illustrate this unique communicative method. Rhythm and language together create culture; together they form our primary modes of communication.

My upbringing in the African Methodist Episcopal Church significantly shaped my understanding of rhythm's power in socialization. My father, a presiding elder in the 8th Episcopal District, introduced me to a spiritual and communal rhythm long before I fully comprehended its diasporic origins. Before discussing African contributions to New Orleans culture in schools, I experienced them in church. Our spirits responded profoundly to rhythm, tone, melody, and harmony—an innate response that reinforced our collective bonds. This bond gathered the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

Tracing our journey through the Mafi, arriving at the port of Orleans, through the spaces at Congo Square, into the hidden swamps, tent revivals, and finally into church spaces, our socialization continually evolved yet remained fundamentally rooted in face-to-face, body-to-body connections.

Rhythm was not merely a part of our lives—it symbolized our existence, resilience, and resistance.

GIVE THANKS for this moment that we never expected ever to happen. GIVE THANKS for that extra time that we were given today, to just be. GIVE THANKS for having the opportunity to be amongst like minds and like spirits where people really understand each other and we're not the weirdos. *That's right.* GIVE THANKS to us not being afraid to walk in our color and walk in our history. GIVE THANKS to the Mamas, and the Bibles, and the grandmothers, your grandmother, your great grandmother, your grandfather, your great aunt, your great cousin... GIVE THANKS. GIVE THANKS for not being afraid to walk in your purpose. *Walk in your purpose.* Because our purpose is our history, our history is our preservation, our preservation is our prayers, our prayers are our rituals, our rituals are our testimonies, our testimonies are our phenomenological experience. To all of those things, GIVE THANKS.



I've observed that Black people often communicate most effectively through rhythm rather than words alone. Family reunions exemplify this truth vividly, where music transforms tensions among estranged relatives into moments of connection. Music lifts us from despair, rhythm alleviates trauma, and drums have historically facilitated our healing within sacred communal spaces.

Sacred spaces have varying rhythms determined by the spiritual offerings involved. Ritualistically, the deity invoked—whether Obatala or Ogun—requires distinct rhythms, reinforcing our understanding of communal responsibilities within these sacred contexts.

What is my connection to Black social dance? If we remove the word "Black" and simply ask, "What is social dance?" we arrive at the obvious—a fundamentally communal exchange made possible through socializing.

Consider events such as the quadroon balls of New Orleans' past. These gatherings vividly displayed the hierarchy of social formations. Wealthy white men attended with the benefit of a structured form of socialization that catered to them. Black people, however, were forcibly included—to fulfill roles dictated by their masters. Black girls, prepared and presented to affluent white men, exemplified the ever-present power dynamics that shaped social interactions. These differences of experience highlight the broader point that socialization mobilizes itself uniquely within each community, in relation to distinct histories of violence.

My upbringing emphasized communal living over individualism. Unless we were alone in private prayer before our altars, our lives unfolded collectively—face to face, body to body, voice to voice, prayer to prayer. This communal lifestyle is ingrained. When we casually announced, "Oh girl, it's gonna be a get-together," we intuitively prepared ourselves for meaningful, embodied

encounters. Those gatherings depended inherently on our understanding of the significance of physical presence and connection.

Historically speaking, Black socialization required developing clandestine methods to maintain our communal practices away from oppressive viewership. The sacredness of these secret gatherings was integral to our collective identity. Ritualistic and diasporic practices were often reserved for secluded spaces deep in the swamps—places that created a mysticism for colonial watchers.

At the same time, it created an orientation toward defining us in peculiar terms.

The colonial observations beginning in Congo Square with the removal of the drum shifted us into secluded spaces throughout what we now know as parishes.

The secrecy surrounding our socialization occasioned fear and suspicion among masters, who wondered anxiously, “Wait a minute, my slaves—what are they doing? Where are they going?” This anxiety eventually led to the creation of Congo Square, an authorized yet carefully controlled gathering place for enslaved Africans, its access permitted from sunrise to sunset. Even within this sanctioned space, masters watched closely, hiding behind magnolia trees, aiming desperately to decipher the mysteries of our rhythmic communication.

At Congo Square, enslaved Africans from diverse tribes—each speaking different languages yet unified by the shared trauma of enslavement—communicated beyond spoken words.

Observing this, masters were confounded: “How can they understand each other without a common language?” Our ability to connect profoundly through rhythm, music, and prayer astonished them.

When masters recognized the power embedded within our drums, they confiscated them, hoping to disrupt our communal practices. They misunderstood, however, that the drums themselves, although deeply significant, were merely instruments. Our true social power and unity lie in the spirit of rhythm, something intangible and indestructible.

We adapted, utilizing the clapping of our hands, turning pots, sticks, and other objects into new rhythmic instruments, continuing our sacred processes.

Words on paper rarely capture the true depth and weight of lived rhythmic experience.

My choreography embodies this belief, consciously striving to translate deep cultural experiences into accessible artistic expressions. When choreographing, I pray, "God, remove self from self, and ancestors use me."

This practice allows me to create rhythms that resonate universally, fostering profound communal experiences across diverse audiences in the body and in the spirit.

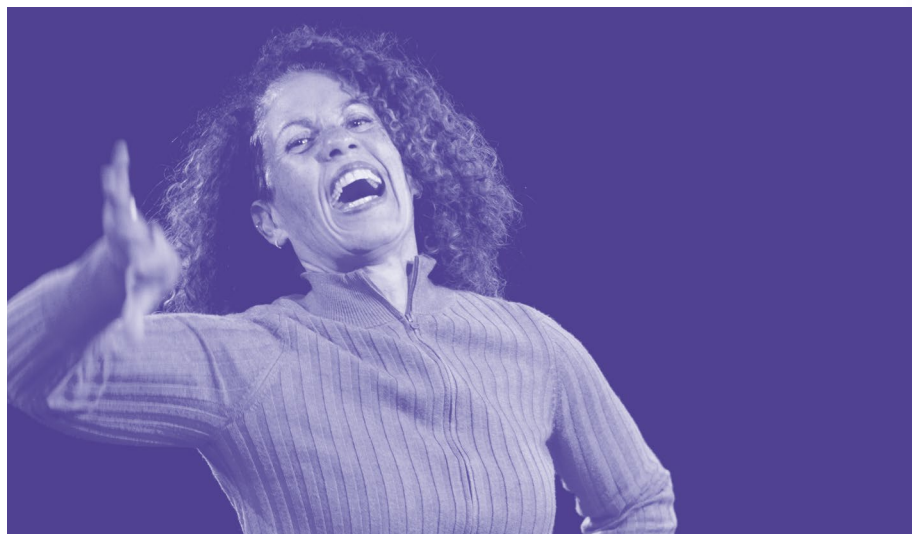
In essence, my connection to Black social dance is deeply personal and historically unapologetically rich, embodying collective identity, spiritual communion, resistance, and tested resilience. It is intricately interwoven into the cultural fabric of Black New Orleans, persistently expressed through rhythm, transcending time and circumstance.

Ase

Amen

And So, It Is.





Remembering and Dancing with/in the Presence of Ghosts

Rosemarie A. Roberts

Rosemarie A. Roberts is a dance studies scholar, dancer, educator, and author of *Baring Unbearable Sensualities: Hip Hop Dance, Bodies, Race, and Power* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2021). Her artistic and scholarly work blend history, dance and theater in order to conduct social psychological and anthropological investigations of Afro-diasporic dance as embodiments of difference, knowledge and resistive power.

Night 1

The light of two white candles flickers
Shadows dance on the walls
Gathering bubbles—baby energy centers swimming
In the large round vessel of water
Crucifix
Scent of frankincense and myrrh fills the cigar smoked air
Elders seated at a big rectangular table covered
in white cloth
Contrasts brown skinned elders
Momentarily seated

The scent of floral perfumed water
Lands under my nose
Mixing with the scent of incense and cigar
Bodies pop up
Flailing arms reaching for the heavens
Other arms akimbo
Swaying hips
Pounding fists
Heaving chests
Oh, how I remember El Centro of my childhood
That is how I knew you then...

Night 2

Many years later, I was in the Caribbean studying West African Dance. One night dancers and drummers go to an abandoned sugar plantation. It's like a postcard. Under the light of a full moon we danced to the djembe drums. Suddenly, I hear the metallic, clanking sound of chains. Then I feel rattling, clattering chains vibrating through me, rise up through my bare feet, move through my body, landing and resonating in my chest and under my feet. Fiercely focused on the djembe rhythm and my laboring breath, I continue to dance.

The rattling, clanking vibration. I freeze...

The smallest grains of sand
 In-between my toes
 I see you, notice you in the in-between spaces
 And underfoot—I feel you
 Grounding my steps
 Fleeting rock dust
 Inside every grain
 Signals of life
 There are ghosts
 Blown, drifting, traveling across time and space
 Each grain that lands
 That travels in-between spaces
 In-between my toes
 In-between here and there
 You inhabit both here and there

*I asked others if they could hear or feel the
sound of chains dragging. No one else heard
or felt a thing. I was alone. Or was I?*

Ghost from the four directions
Seeping s-l-o-w-l-y ever soooo s-l-o-w-l-y
Like grains of sand in an hourglass
Through cracks in my consciousness
Ascending
Rising in me filling in the small and tiny spaces of my
sensorial consciousness

Night 3

Feeling you, sensing you, YES
Following you through me
Filling the crevices
Dripping
Dropping
Into
My body consciousness
Listening
Beginning...

It was a quiet, internal dialogue animated by my childhood experiences in El Centro. Avery Gordon (1997) reminds us that “the modus operandi of a ghost is haunting, and haunting makes its only social meaning in contact with the living’s time of the now . . . the ghost is nothing without you” (179). My work is nothing without ghosts—social and otherwise.

Day 1...2...3...100..365...36500

In a Haitian dance class, I learned lbo. The small shuffling feet, fisted, tightly held hands crossed behind my back, incrementally giving way to bigger, longer, free feet and arm movements is when the weighted feeling of dragging, clanging chains made sense in my body. The then presence of sugar plantation ghosts are now. An overwhelming, relentless sensience drive me to study Afro-Cuban, -Puerto Rican and -Brazilian dance. Polyrhythmic, polycentric and multi-dimensional movement techniques urge me toward an emergent and deep resonance in my body and the social body. The "I" melts into a social "Us."

It's not about what you see. I've learned that I need to push through an overdeveloped sense of sight toward sensing into the places where the social ghosts are leading me to sense into the something "more" the multi-layered texture meanings to which social ghosts are directing me to face. In communion with the social body is where the erased, excised fragments of history lie. It is where the pain, the beauty and the joy are. It is where the immovable truth of those dragging chains and the generation of beings teaches about liberation.

Dancing for life

Dancing for your death

Dancing to connect with your presence

Everyday

Afro-Diaspora and Black dances of Cuba, Haiti, Puerto Rico and Brazil are a way to remember, to put together fractured memories and the silences and erasures in our collective history and collective knowledges of what it is to be Black. Afro-Diaspora dance is a reminder of what is possible when we heed the call of ghosts and sense into their haunting presence. The feeling of dancing, I sense into images of La Lupe's powerful vulnerability and pain in her gestures and her voice. I hear the chains. I dance toward the call, the impulse. The weight, I need to feel the weight. That is where the release and the possibility and the hope as I assemble, and commune with the ghosts of a past that I may not have been, but that I feel as inherited magic. A feeling, a sense, an experience assembled into an Embodied Methodology (Roberts, 2021). As a Methodology of Why. Why be free? It is important to know why we want to be free.

Gordon, A. (1997). *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Roberts, R.A. (2021). *Baring Unbearable Sensualities: Hip Hop Dance, Bodies, Race and Power*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.



Junious Brickhouse and Black Social Dance

Junious L. Brickhouse

Junious L. Brickhouse is an internationally recognized scholar practitioner dedicated to the sustainability of Street Dance cultures and communities. A researcher, folklorist, cultural ambassador, mentor, and logistician, in 2005 he founded Urban Artistry Inc. (www.urbanartistry.org), inspiring and creating a movement of artists dedicated to the preservation of street dance culture.

"My dance training began at family gatherings dancing the funk styles of the era." From this early embodied encounter, Junious Brickhouse's life has been a steady assertion that "movement traditions born of marginalized communities matter." As a scholar-practitioner, cultural ambassador, dancer and choreographer, Brickhouse has spent over 30 years working to ensure that the art forms rooted in the African diaspora are not only preserved but honored as living practices.

Born in Virginia Beach, Virginia, Brickhouse recalls learning dance in community centers and "parking lots, where young people were teaching each other and building communities around urban dance forms." That formative learning set the stage for his long-standing commitment to "the sustainability of Hip Hop Cultures." For him, these dance practices are more than performance—they are "expressions of identity, resistance, and survival" that carry the deep resonances of Black social life. Learning dance in parking lots creates a particular orientation toward understanding gathering and space as open and accessible, thus aligning with Black Social Dance as a re-formation of sociality. In terms of performance, it is the people who gather—building communities through movement—who determine the particularities of geography and so on.

As the founder and Executive Director of Urban Artistry Inc., Brickhouse "inspires and creates a movement of artists dedicated to the preservation of street dance culture, specifically within communities of practice." Through initiatives like The International Soul Society Festival, The Preservatory, and the UA Digital Archives, in Urban Artistry he "encourages other artists to research and document tradition bearers and their contributions." This work exemplifies how Brickhouse's model champions "community-focused urban arts programming and cultural preservation with international reach" such that Black social dance attends to the constellation of embodied processes connecting Black lives across Afro-diasporic spaces.

Black social dance, in Brickhouse's world, is neither fixed nor closed—it is an ever-evolving phenomenon. It must exist in the exchanges between generations, between countries, and across stages and ciphers. He notes that his projects are not just about honoring the past, but “activating 30+ years of community engagement in over 60 countries.” Movements here can then be read as modes of critical diplomacy and connection pointing towards insisting on cultural intelligibility.

As Director of Next Level, a U.S. Department of State initiative promoting “cultural exchange and conflict transformation through hip hop music and dance,” Brickhouse drives the strategic vision for global engagement. His dual experience as a U.S. Army logistics professional and an international performer has allowed him to lead across boundaries—geographic, political, and disciplinary. In this role, Brickhouse has served as a site manager and artist in countries such as Indonesia, Egypt, Myanmar, Bolivia, Nigeria, and Mexico, among others, using hip hop as a tool to promote peace and mutual understanding.

His philosophy of cultural work is grounded in mentorship. “Junious’ daily focus on mentorship is the backbone of his international impact and success,” and he believes in creating accessible pathways to institutional investment within urban arts communities. His commitment to sustainability as tradition bearers is informed by his mentorship under NEA of National Heritage Fellows John Dee Holeman and Phil Wiggins.

Brickhouse, Junious. Junious Brickhouse Official Website.
Accessed April 21, 2025.
<https://juniousbrickhouse.com>.

“Junious Brickhouse.” *Next Level USA*, U.S. Department of State. Accessed April 21, 2025.
<https://www.nextlevel-usa.org/junious-brickhouse>.

By advising mentees on how to be both tradition-keepers and innovators, he facilitates an ecological imperative of care in which freedom is practiced through embodied knowledge.

Brickhouse engages in rigorous folkloric research strategies. From Ring Shouts and Acoustic Country Blues to Hip Hop, he insists on understanding “the nature and meaning of these art forms and their influences.” His research affirms that the lineage of Black dance is not incidental—it is a continuity of expressive practices that record histories, mark resistance, and rehearse aesthetics of liberation. His thinking about black dance in this way points to an understanding of movement archiving: of people who gather to move, who insist on a social formation that pulls for black-written history books to be stored in institutions of knowledge. Advocating for “greater visibility of Urban Dance and Music Cultures as American Folklife Traditions on a national scale,” Brickhouse serves on the Board of the American Folklore Society and the National Council for the Traditional Arts. His work insists that urban dance is not peripheral but central to the American cultural narrative.

Junious Brickhouse is not simply preserving black dance formations—he is living it. “We use movement to interpret music, tell stories, and create space for collective healing.” His career is a declaration that dance is knowledge, that the body remembers, and that Black social dance is an orientation of freedom in motion.



Jit. Grit. Soul. Legacy.

Gabrielle “Queen Gabby” McLeod

Gabrielle McLeod “Queen Gabby” is the Queen of Detroit Jit. In her journey to push the development of Jit’s culture, Queen Gabby has won the Kresge Artist Fellowship for Live Arts; performed in the opera “BLUE” with the Detroit Opera House; in the SLIPPAGE *past/FAST/dance* with the Detroit Institute of Arts.

Grit

Soul

Legacy

—these are the words that define Jit.

It is not just a dance, but a way of life, and an organization of life itself. Rooted in the neighborhoods of Detroit, Inkster, Highland Park, and Ecorse, Jit is a form passed from generation to generation. It is Black culture in motion, emerging from talent shows, basement parties, and club floors. It is something that arrives within our bodies and creates the conditions to foreground an understanding of Black social dance as an orientation towards freedom in motion.

Growing up in Inkster, I didn't know how deeply art could shape life. But I had to trust my own process of discovery—and the people who would walk with me on this journey. In doing so, I found purpose, understanding, discipline, and the power that lies in familiar gathering. Jit is responsible for my maturation as a person and an artist. It raised me and provided options for pivoting when nothing else seemed on the table.

Dancing provided the mechanisms of freedom for me, provided the chance to offer myself as a container—one committed to the preservation of Jit and the careful dissemination of its power throughout the world. This meant giving back to that which gave itself to me, and that giving and receiving are the impetus to create dance at the highest level possible.¹

¹ “Queen Gabby,” Kresge Arts in Detroit, accessed May 9, 2025, <https://kresgeartsindetroit.org/artist/queen-gabby/>.

Detroit is essential.

Detroit holds us.

It is kind of a scene, a memory, a movement, and a refusal to forget where we are from.

The young people push so hard because it must be done. To be from here means to push into the thing, to insist on movement even when it seems undanceable—like bebop. And it is not just dancing. At the core of this formation is TechnoFest and access to community events. It is speed in Detroit, it is flagging and flashy, it is knowing you can't start driving in the middle of the road if you don't know what it means to be Black. If you let someone who wasn't supposed to drive, drive—and they crash—then what?

There's risk in the rhythm.

There's a responsibility in the ride.

There's something sacred being protected, something communal being guarded when we gather to move, and compete. The mad dancers and the dream team point to what it means to rep where we are from. The rivalry is not just performance—it's survival. Being in competition mode is not just for competition itself. It is what makes it

a rivalry in the first place. Rivalry, rooted in a history of flagging and gang activities, carries blood, sweat, and tears into the circle. The social includes the negative as well—arguing and disagreement get carried into the dancing.

We see it in Tight Eyes, in krumping. We see it in getting sturdy, in Chicago footwork. We see it in jookin' and drill music. These are not isolated movements—they respond to each other.

The music inspires the music.

The music makes the thing possible.

*The body answers a beat that
was already waiting.*

This for me is also a lineage—funkaterring, Jit, Philly handdancing, Chicago stepping, DC bop step. These partner dance steps were smoother, they are shaped by slowed-down music. There is a continuation, a choreography of inheritance and resistance. And still, it starts from home.

The dance works I create remain committed to this: the roots, the room, the rhythm, and that brings us back to Grit, Soul, and Legacy."



Black Social Dance as Lifestyle, Knowledge, and Heritage

Kyle “JustSole” Clark and “Queen Dinita” Clark

Kyle “JustSole” Clark and Dinita “Queen Di” Clark are both award-winning dancers, choreographers and street dance competitors who have dedicated over 20+ years to the cultivation, transmission, and preservation of Hip Hop/Street and club dance forms/cultural traditions. In 2024, Kyle and Dinita were sponsored by one of the top global streetwear companies SNIPES USA to open a Street Dance Studio called “Just Sole X Snipes Dance Studio” in Chinatown, Philadelphia.

Our relationship with Black social dance is not just about movement—it's about lifestyle. It is a connection we grew up inside of, not as something taught in a classroom. Something that lived at barbecues, birthday parties, graduations, and block parties—the rhythm was in the room before we knew what rhythm meant. It was in the way we gathered as a family to watch TV shows and movies like *Soul Train*, *What's Happening*, *Tap*, *White Nights*, and *Dancin' on Air* to name a few. It was in how we cleaned the house with music saturating the walls. It was in the way our great-grandmothers bopped with us on Saturday mornings. It was the way that we came together in an intergenerational organic manner. This was our first curriculum—one that welcomed us into the conversation, not silenced us with rules and structures. We were seen. We were moving together across generations, and that movement taught us how to be social and relational.

The dance was everywhere, and so was the music. In Philly, you could turn any corner and see a drill team or street hitters pop up, executing choreography in the middle of the street. There was joy in that impromptu performance—a kind of magic in seeing so many Black people smiling together, celebrating each other without needing a special occasion. That was our education in improvisation, long before we had the word for it.

We didn't need technique, but we developed it. All we needed was rhythm. And we always had rhythm.

What makes Black social dance social is our collective consciousness. We all hear the same thing in the music. And when one of us becomes the music—when a body embodies the beat—we don't just watch. We join in. Step, clap, step, clap—suddenly we're doing the electric slide. "Oh, I can do that too," someone says. That moment of shared motion is a moment of shared meaning. It's not about performance for an audience—it's about presence with each other. **Even when we dance alone, we are never alone.**

We are bouncing our shoulders and nodding our heads because we feel it in our mitochondria. And when we look up and see someone else feeling it too, that is our point of contact. That is how we know we belong.

The dance gives us access to each other. When I move, I demonstrate what I hear. When you nod at me mid-step, you're saying, "I hear it too." That nod is everything. It means we're in sync, even if we've never spoken. It gives me permission to move the way I want to, because I've seen you do it first. And sometimes we may not even like each other—but we're still dancing together. And in that movement, there's a kind of resolution. Conflict dissolves into rhythm. Movement becomes mediation. We call it a battle.

Though Black social dance is accessible, it is not understood by all. It's coded. There is cultural recognition embedded in the steps. You can't fake it, but you don't need a certificate to be fluent. The dance speaks to those who already know, even if they don't know that they know. It's not always taught—it's remembered. And that's where its power lies. Hip Hop, for example, didn't need a classroom. It didn't need ballet slippers. It needed the block, the club, the park jam. That's where it learned to breathe. That's how it became a language of the people—our people. Because it was ours before it was ever codified and commodified.

In Philly, House arrives the moment we gather. It doesn't need a venue; it needs a crowd and a beat. We don't all have the money to pay for a ballet class, but we can all go to the Wawa Parade, the free concert in the park, or a block party where the DJ spins house, funk, and disco. And in that space, we share. Someone from South Philly might teach a jack. Someone from North Philly might bring the Wu-Tang.

We swap movement like stories, and our bodies learn each other's dialects. That's when House becomes a gathering—a classroom without walls, a cipher of cultural exchange.

Black social dance is not just expression—it's knowledge. It is most definitely somatic. We know each other through how we move. We recognize thinking in posture, argument in rhythm. Once we connect physically, we begin to ask questions with our bodies. And when we find alignment, we arrive at collective consciousness. That's the curriculum: move first, then understand. And when we do, we move together, in rhythm and in thought.

But this knowledge isn't new—it's a continuation. Black social dance draws on Afro-diasporic movement that came before it, and reshapes it to fit the now. When we teach kids and students, we watch them do party dances to Baltimore club tracks, but we also see movements that mirror clowning from L.A., or grooves from the Northeast club scene. They haven't seen those other dances—but they are those dancers. It's in the blood. The instrument hits, and the body responds in the only way it knows how— through blood memory.

Teaching these forms—locking, house, and hip hop—we see that the students remix them, reinterpret them. They do what they're supposed to do: transform the foundation. Their bodies are sites of innovation. Even when we don't explicitly teach heritage, they embody it. That's the lineage. It travels through rhythm, gesture, pause, and breath. And when we recognize it in them, we adapt too. We find new ways to share, to teach, to honor what came before, while dancing toward what's next.

This is how heritage lives. One tribe might forget. Another might remember. And when they meet, they pass the story back and forth—not with words, but with steps. That's how we keep our history alive. Through movement. Through rhythm. Through the body. It's cultural memory, yes, but it's also cultural reinvention. We don't hold the past still— we let it dance.

What we're doing is part of a continuum. There is no final form. Blackness reformulates every generation. We then give it a different name. We add new flavors. The foundational groove and bounce is like peanut butter, each generation adds something like pistachios, jelly, etc, and it becomes something else. Adding sub-genres to the Hip Hop Dance family. Still familiar, still rooted, but reborn with every change in the beat.

This is the knowledge of Black Social Dance. It is not "academic," but embodied and informed pedagogy. It fits in an academic formation given the way in which it provides a scaffolding for understanding Black sociality, Black inheritance, and relationality. How this knowledge arrives and unfolds is not fixed. It is always moving with and against the grain and time. It is how we gather, how we know, how we become each other—step by step, beat by beat.

We are dancing in and of memory, suggesting that the act of dancing together is both located within our physical, mental, emotional, and ontological memory.





Black Social Dance in South Africa

Xavier Livermon

Xavier Livermon is Associate Professor of Critical Race and Ethnic Studies, Director of Black Studies, and faculty affiliate with Feminist Studies and Film and Digital Media at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He has published widely in the fields of African Popular Culture and African Queer Studies.

I was reading one of the final reader reports for my book manuscript, *Kwaito Bodies* (2020), when I noticed a passage where the reviewer described the book as “the first postapartheid study of social dance.” I had not actually realized that my book, which initially I thought was about youth engagement in a musical scene solely, could speak to the important role of dance in creating “otherwise” possibility (Crawley, 2016). In fact, my book opens and closes with an emphasis on the sonic – the sense that in studying kwaito music my main activity was active listening. And yet, when I recalled my own ethnographic practice, I realized that I spent much of it, perhaps the majority of it, dancing. It was through dance that I began to understand and learn how young Black South Africans navigated postapartheid change and it is those observations that I’d like to share with you today.

Black social dance in South Africa has a rich history that includes forms of traditional dance, different forms of western dance that became popularized due to colonial contact, and contemporary popular dances that draw inspiration locally and Afrodiasporically. Importantly, in South Africa dance forms are hierarchized. Even in postapartheid South Africa, it is Western and Western-derived dance forms that predominate with respect to funding, exposure and artistic support. Secondly, cultural practices and celebrations that receive a combination of corporate and government funding means that forms of “traditional” dance are generally next for consideration. Contemporary forms of popular dance are generally the most de-prioritized. While such dances can be seen on dance floors and in musical performances, they are rarely accorded the same opportunities for training and professional development as the former two categories.

It was the popular and globalized dance forms of the youth that predominated in the music and social scenes that I studied. And like Black youth itself, the cultural practices they developed were often taken less seriously. When I set out to study kwaito and the social practices of postapartheid Black South African youth, one of my hopes was that the incredible contributions of Black youth and the imaginative ways in which they were practicing freedom would be taken more seriously. In what follows I will attempt to outline briefly some of the contours of contemporary Black social dance in South Africa and how that connects to questions of freedom currently.

1. Globalization, Diaspora, and Encounter

Black Social dance in South Africa can be said to be globalized. But as I did more research and moved my body on more dance floors, I began to feel that globalization, despite being a technically correct term for thinking about South African Black social dance, did not capture the specificity of exchange happening on the dance floors. I now prefer the term diaspora as a way to think about the exchanges on the dance floor that circulate in South Africa. Black South Africans have a long history of adapting dances and social trends from around the Black world to suit their social and material circumstances and kwaito during the postapartheid period was no exception. Kwaito dance is a heady blend of hip-hop, dancehall, South African street dancing, traditional dance, and popular dances from elsewhere on the African continent just to name a few. But what unites these different forms of dance is that they are all performed and developed out of the African continent and its diaspora. This reveals dance as a critical site of diasporic identification and belonging. The apartheid government wanted to shrink the world of Black South Africans. The institutionalization of Afrikaans as the medium of school instruction in the 1970s is just one

example of this policy. Limiting information about the rest of the world was crucial to obstructing the liberation movement. The ways in which Black South Africans maneuvered around this desire to limit their freedom dreams speaks to the importance of diasporic flows (including of culture) of solidarity. The fall of apartheid was also about a fall of South Africa's isolation both from the rest of the African continent and from the global South. The embrace of the rest of the world, particularly the embrace of Blackness from the global South, is reflected in hybrid style of dancing that developed in contemporary Black social dance which is just as likely to draw from dance crazes in West Africa and the Caribbean as the U.S. or Europe.

2. Gender & Sexuality and Embodied Performance

Throughout South African history commentators have written about how the dancefloor is an experimental space where gender relations and sexual mores can be performed and revised. Contemporary social dance in South Africa in many ways expanded the possibilities of radical gender and sexual/ity performances. South Africa's liberation movement was unique amongst many on the African continent in that gender and sexuality were seen not as additive issues that could be addressed at some later time; rather they were seen as central to the project of liberation. The violence and inequality of apartheid made many in the movement sensitive to continuing other forms of discrimination. As a result, South Africa has a rather progressive constitution that contains an equality clause that protects its citizens from discrimination on the basis of gender and sexuality.

Queer citizens of South Africa have lived with their newfound freedoms. They have been more loud, more out, and more proud in postapartheid South Africa. Similarly, Black South African women have exercised these new freedoms. A vibrant and growing feminist movement has asked South African society critical questions about how continued forms of cisheteropatriarchy undermine South Africa's freedom ideals. In Black social dance what these new freedoms have meant is that we see more women engaging dance spaces on their own or with groups of other women alongside queers who openly showcase their desire and pleasure on the dance floor. Women and queers have developed dances often symbiotically feeding off one another in a celebration of femininity and fluidity. The Pussy Parties in central Johannesburg were an example of how women and queers reframed the Black social dance scene to be more explicitly feminist and queer. Such parties became laboratories for women DJs to learn and practice the craft, they became safe zones for Black queer and trans folk, particularly Black femmes. The dance floor was gendered and sexualized, but this was a gender and sexuality space of free expression.

The postapartheid South African constitution suggests in its protections for women, queers, and trans folk that part of the process of liberation is the liberation of the Black body. A quick examination of Black social dance scenes from the 1980s and 1990s reveals that these scenes often were spaces where rights were kinesthetically performed prior to their official encoding into law. In those scenes South Africans defied racial segregation, the criminalization of queerness and gender diversity, and crossed class, ethnic, and other seemingly entrenched social lines. In the contemporary moment the daring example set by their feminist and queer ancestors shines through in the dashing and fabulous dancing styles central

to kwaito and its more contemporary forms *g'qom*, and *amapiano*. On and off the dance floor, Black women and Black queer and trans folk are claiming space, inventing culture, and remaking ossified identities. Part of what makes the Black social dance scene so fascinating in the South African context is its openness to queerness. This is not to suggest that gendered and homophobic violence is non-existent in Black social dance, far from it. Instead, I highlight the myriad ways in which women, queer, and trans folk have taken over dance floors, created social scenes, and fashioned new possibilities not only for themselves but for all South Africans. In taking up space in Black social dance scenes they claim the right to be freely, openly, fully themselves.

Ultimately, the importance of the Black social dance scene in South Africa lies in how social dance indexes freedom. During apartheid, Black social dance was a way for Black South Africans to reclaim pleasure, joy, their humanity and to exercise their freedom dreams. In the postapartheid moment, this important role of social dance continues, made more urgent by the ways Black South Africans continue to be vexed by the residues of apartheid.

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Livermon, Xavier. *Kwaito Bodies: Remastering Space and Subjectivity in Post-Apartheid South Africa*. Duke University Press, 2020.



Questions

Kemi Adeyemi

Kemi Adeyemi is Associate Professor of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington. She is the author of *Feels Right: Black Queer Women & the Politics of Partying in Chicago* (2022) and co-editor of the volume *Queer Nightlife* (2021). Kemi founded and directs The Black Embodiments Studio, an arts writing incubator, public programming initiative, and publishing platform dedicated to building discourse around contemporary black art.

Some of the questions I wonder with: What becomes available when considering the social as something that is practiced through a mutual recognition of labor, and how can that clue us into the rules and regulations of a group? What are the terms of its informal instruction? What are the systems of assessment that produce the place of dance and, with that, the place of the social? After that: what do we make of bad dancing, about movements that are not learned or not learned well? How do we think about a social that may not, cannot, or will not cohere around one who cannot or will not dance? Our senses of, beliefs in, and insistence on vulnerability, participation, agreement, and intimacy often initiate and ground the generative orientations that the practice and the study of Black Social Dance invite. What can we make of disagreement? What happens when we unpack the scaffolding that “dance equals freedom”—in our bodies, of the social—that undergirds and often overwhelms the study of Black Social Dance. Who do we then have to see in the corners of the dance floor, on the sidelines? Those who got on the dance floor but quickly left. Folks who were loudly corrected or laughed at. Those got that quiet look, that scoff, the gentle push/bump away. This too is Black Social Dance, and such moments tell us a more complicated story, not only of the individual’s “failed” technique but the “successful” maintenance of the social.

What becomes available when considering Black Social (Dance) as an intense and sometimes painful site of discipline? This is pain that is physical, given how one might have to contort to (re)learn technique, and it is the psychic threat of expulsion from the Black Social—however major or minor, playful or serious, that threat may be articulated. Thinking about “bad” dancers, whose failed movement is perceived as a social failure, can allow us to think in more complex ways about how the rules and regulations of the social are circumscribed by both racial expectation and physical ability; how phenotype, physical technique, cultural competency, and racial belonging are collapsed, and that collapse is obscured and re-described as a measurable thing called “Black” or a biological essence called “Black” or a spiritual inheritance called “Black.” This is a racial project that Dance Studies needs unpack, think with, move against if it wants to develop urgently needed vocabularies for addressing how race is articulated in a political era of renewed fascist interest in whose bodies can and should do what.





Credit: DJ Celeste Alexander at Chosen Few Picnic, Chicago, IL, July 2025. Photo by Myrin New.

Connection to Musical Souls, One Blend at a Time

DJ Celeste Alexander

Wife, mother, DJ and co-owner of a music label, DJ Celeste Alexander was introduced to DJing by the legendary Steve “Silk” Hurley in 1982. Celeste has played in various clubs in various cities nationwide and has shared the decks with names like Ron Carroll, The Chosen Few, Jihad Muhammad, Ian Friday, Boo Williams, Lou Gorbea, DJ Spinna and Grammy winning DJ Louie Vega, among many others.

DJing is about finding someone in a space to create a connection with—and that connection produces the conditions for healing. It's important to me and to whoever you're connecting to, because music itself has healing properties.

We heal in that formation. Music helps us get through. Music paves the way for needed releases. Music helps us forget. Music transcends us to another place where we don't have to think, all we can do, all we need to do is just let go and feel.

I don't think that's any less important when you're doing it and only three people show up than it is when you're doing it and 3,000 people show up. In this work of reflection, I will outline the historical moment that gave birth to my entry into DJing and then I'll move between what inspired the work and how it figures into black social dance.

I can recall attending parties organized by my mom and dad when I was a little girl, and there was always a DJ present—the person who is in charge of curating and presenting music that provided the conditions for a specific flow and vibe. That established an interest in the idea of crafting meaningful moments between music, dancers and social connectivity. Witnessing the passion exuded from the DJ in these settings created a passion for this kind of social formation and community.

My professional interest began with an encounter with the craft as it is now: mixing and blending simultaneously two records, two turntables, two CDJs, and a mixer. Using that method to present music mixing, on the fly, live together—with whatever your medium is. At the time, it was turntables and a mixer simultaneously that created flow for a mix artist. But that was still something that was very much being developed at the time.

I was told that it was believed that women did not have the coordination to do it. So it was, to me, a dare or a challenge. That was what brought me into the craft and practice of DJing.

Apart from DJing being a response to the notion that women could not replicate the kind of coordination usually represented by men, I was also someone who was always attracted to music presentation. Not learning an instrument—playing music was entirely too disciplined for me. But DJing, I could. The letters DJ mean “disc jockey” and that was what they did on the radio. So, I became motivated to learn the craft and shatter the myth that mixing was something women could not do.

Moving away from my experience around DJing as a dare, I soon began to fall in love with the craft. This meant falling in love with the art form of music presentation: with dancers, or curating a vibe of a room, or conducting the flow of a social setting. Harnessing that energy, bringing that energy, and then taking that energy into different levels through playing and connecting musically with people—that became the passion.

A crucial part of DJing is its social formation.

It's a production of black, social, collective connectivity where music is always a major component. So, while it was initially a response to a dare, I fell in love with the music and then re-fell in love with how DJing allows for presenting music and connecting with people at the same time.

In my work as a DJ, I don't see an audience—only a community. The reason why I would say I see a community is because participation from all parties is needed in order for it to really work. I still have to touch and find my way to that type of collective connectivity where we can all vibe together on the same wave. But it requires participation from everyone, so community is a very important part of it.

If I'm doing a job in public, do I need the community?

Do I need the audience?

Do I need the vibe?

It would be nice to always have it, but the reality is that sometimes people don't show up. Sometimes, people are not there, and I'm left with the potential challenge of how to play with the same level of intensity. However, I play for small gatherings the same way I play for a thousand. All to say, I'm going to play for one as if I'm playing for a thousand.

DJing has a personal formation too. I have had times when I just play for myself, privately at home—and just enjoy the sensations that emerge because this is also my passion. I get immense joy out of it. But when I am talking about presenting as a DJ or as a vibe curator in a social setting, what happens when nobody shows up?

What does the DJ do?

Do you play with less intentionality?

No, you maintain the same level of intensity—I do a disservice and disrespect to the music and the craft if I play any less at any time that I'm presenting.

I need that connectivity, but it does not have to come from 5,000 people in a space. It could come very well from one person who just happens to be in the room.



Section 2

Body Geographies: Mapping Freedoms CADD Biannual Conference

February 16-18, 2024

Duke University, Durham NC

convened by Thomas F. DeFrantz



Participating Researchers:

- 68 Naomi Bragin, *Associate Professor, University of Washington*
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-

Thomas F. DeFrantz, *Professor, Northwestern University, Director, SLIPPAGE*

E. Moncell Durden, *Associate Professor of Practices, University of Southern California*

Raquel Monroe, *Dean, Chadwick A. Boseman College of Fine Arts, Howard University*



Black Social Dance and Kinship

Naomi Macalalad Bragin

Naomi Bragin is a dancer, writer, wanderer, wonderer, and is curious about people who use art to collaborate in healing and recreating worlds. She invented the word 'kinethic' to describe how their collective movement practices reorient dancers toward other ways of sensing, being and belonging in ethical relation. From 2002-2008, she directed DREAM, an Oakland, California-based streetdance company which toured nationally.

I found my dance cloaked in smoky bass shaking clubs, underground parties and raves of 1990s Los Angeles. Restless, I floated away on the night, landing in gritty downtown warehouses or the city's desert edges—wherever the wild find shelter, where I heeded the call (Divas to the Dancefloor Please) animating me with inner rhythms of Detroit techno, Chicago Trax, and New York Garage. Where I felt the sound of blackness conjured in Mavis Staples' raspy screams now transformed by Victor Simonelli's driving house rhythms into the Sound of One:

*“Let me take you there! Ain't nobody cryin ...
oh ayyyyyyyyyeee... I Know a Place...”*

I returned, after these regular trips home, to the East Coast to continue my undergraduate studies in dance choreography and performance at Wesleyan University, where I was exposed to Euro-American traditions of postmodern dance and contact improvisation that were nonetheless shaped by African-American and Asian movement forms. My friends and I rode the train into New York City on weekends and breaks to go crate digging in Lower Manhattan record stores. We'd pile in a car, road tripping to raves in and around New England towns. Anywhere I ended up, the dance floor was a space of my familiars calling me to move. On the dance floor I got lost. In glimpses caught of the other people I was moving with, we were all in a blur, the dance I had thought of as mine becoming in my peripheral vision a reflection of other movements. On the dance floor I felt close to being free.

Years later, I learned the craft of streetdance styles like house, hip hop, locking and popping, in classes led by first generation innovators who weaved our studio sessions into life lessons held in colorful stories of their dances' cultural histories. I trained with a promiscuous curiosity, moving from postmodern contact and release techniques, to Brazilian samba and capoeira, Cuban folkloric and popular styles. I found again, moving across forms, the sense of entanglement in motion which I would return to later, in writing of black social dance as an ethic-aesthetic practice.

The ethic-aesthetic is what drew my interest to center black social dance as the foundation of global contemporary hip hop/streetdance, a culture that holds our OGs close, as they in turn hold us to the purpose of study—not only repeating steps and moves but also embodying knowledges commonly held by the people who belong to the dance. We become their kin and it is through this danced practice of kinship that the ethic-aesthetic principles of black social dance are transferred.

Kinship practice infuses the oral history of Locking, an unapologetically funky dance of daredevil leaps, splayed limbs and bent-up muscleman freezes, borne by the freestyle spirit of its innovator Don Campbell, who passed on March 30, 2020. Upon the occasion of the landmark black entertainment show Soul Train's move from Chicago to Los Angeles in 1971, the already flourishing local dance suddenly jumped to international visibility, broadcast to screens from Côte d'Ivoire to the Philippines. Yet emerging out of black social life, Lockers practiced within everyday spaces of their school cafeterias, their neighborhood parks, their around-the-way clubs, and their folks' living rooms. In *Kinethic California: Dancing Funk and Disco Kinships*, I draw on imagery of the animated black locomotive that chugs and winds through Soul Train's opening credits, exploring the idea of locomotive power

to underscore the translocal motion of black social dancers who feel in movement together.

One story, recounted to me by legendary dancer Scoo B Doo, highlights the collective improvisational principles that Locking carries, seeded by a 1970s black social dance called the Breakdown. He describes dancing the Breakdown at home as he prepares for a performance while his friend and fellow Locker Greg Pope watches, momentarily catching his breath. Suddenly, Greg notices something about how Scoo B Doo is turning back around in the middle of doing the step. He asks him to repeat the spontaneous motion and from this practice of watching and repetition, the Stop-and-Go, a signature movement of Locking, begins to emerge.

Scoo B Doo's story encapsulates the collective creative impulse of black social dance. Disrupting a dominant narrative of individual genius, he highlights the way Greg watches over him with a sense I find akin to what Christina Sharpe calls the "wake work" of lateral care. Notwithstanding the surveillance of blackness predicated on the notion of the body as an isolated, separable entity, Greg's wake work is given in black social dance as a practice of kinship, offering other possibilities of being-with.

It is also through the retelling of stories that dancers create historical continuity. The looping rhythmic motion of the Stop-and-Go aestheticizes a theme of repetition and return reflected in Scoo B Doo's stories. In one conversation, Scoo B Doo tells me a powerful story of how he was living on LA's Skid Row during a period of decades that the global dance community thought he was dead. In his absence from the dance world, Lockers called out his name repeatedly as they studied eponymous moves like the Scoo B Doo and Scoo Bop.

Locking became a communal mourning and celebration of Scoo B Doo, embodying the ethic-aesthetic of black social life as creative survival and the affirmation of kinship bonds. In his story, Scoo B Doo recalls how he gets back in touch with his old friend Skeeter Rabbit, as he is called back to Locking and the dance world on the occasion of mourning the passing of their mutual friend Greg Pope.

Audible in these stories of remembrance, handed to me during the time I was writing about California streetdance, is an unfinished conversation among dancers past and present, calling us to seek out the ones hidden in history. Women like Arnetta Johnson, Damita Jo, Thelma Davis, Freddie Maxie, and Edith Pickens. Stories of Arthur, Andrew, and Tinker, the queer and gender transgressive stars of the dance style popularized on Soul Train, called waacking/punking. They are all so much more than singular—they are ciphers holding the collective creativity of generations, worlds unfolding in motion.





“T(HER)D-SPACE as Transformative Possibilities

Gender, Sexuality, and the Intraracial
Politics of Black Social Dance within
Male Exotic Strip Clubs”

Gianina K.L. Strother

Gianina K.L. Strother has an M.F.A. in Interdisciplinary Arts and Media from Columbia College Chicago and a B.S. in Chemistry from Howard University. Her research interests include Black Feminism, Black Studies, Performance Studies, Critical Race Theory, Dance Studies, and Contemporary African American Theatre.

T(HER)d-SPACE as a “THIRD SPACE”

“T(HER)d-Space as Transformative Possibilities: Gender, Sexuality, and the Intraracial Politics of Black Social Dance within Male Exotic Strip Clubs” utilizes a localized style of dance called the Detroit Jit to investigate how Black social dance serves as a space of placemaking that informs Black cultural production and identity formation. I introduce “t(HER)d-space” as a theoretical framework to discuss how Black women’s involvement within performance spaces that are traditionally dominated by Black men offers valuable insight into the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality.

The primary question of my study asks: How does this social dance, which is primarily embodied by Black men in the city of Detroit, reflect gender politics within the Black community, particularly as it relates to gender and sexuality? The scope of this theoretical exploration begins with the history of the Jit explored through the dance collective The Jitterbugs (who are acknowledged as the progenitors of the dance) and then transitions to discuss Black women’s engagement within places where the Jit is performed. I utilize the Detroit Jit as a lens to critically interrogate how places that are traditionally considered as nonpolitical—like male strip clubs—provide the preconditions for social movements and cultural shifts.

What is the jit?

The Jit dance is to Detroit what krumping is to Oakland, jookin is to Memphis, and Beat Ya Feet is to DC. Characterized by its fast footwork, kicks, ankle drops, wiggles, acrobatic flips, arm and groundwork, the Detroit Jit emerged as a dance in the 1970s during the era of funk and social and upheaval within the U.S. Traditionally performed to non-vocal techno-rock or ghettotech music, using a 4/4 meter, the Jit is faster than most dance music genres sitting in the range of 145 to 165BPM. Ghetto Tech is a high-energy, fast-paced electronic dance music genre that emerged from Detroit, Michigan, in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It combines elements of techno, hip-hop, Miami bass, and Chicago's ghetto house, creating a unique, aggressive sound that's characterized by its high BPM (typically ranging from 140 to 160) and minimalistic, repetitive beats. The McGhee brothers—Tracey, James, and Johnny—are credited as the progenitors of the dance.

In 1903, Godfrey Irwin utilized the term jit to “describe a negro, or more usually, a negress, and seemingly [as] a term of derision.”¹ I utilize these two definitions as a theoretical framing to illustrate how the Jit functions as a site of lived politics that is connected not only to the site-specific dynamics of Detroit, but also to the broader history of racism, capitalism, Black sexuality, Black patriarchy, and gender.

¹ J. Louis Kuethe and Godfrey Irwin, “American Tramp and Underworld Slang; Words and Phrases Used by Hoboes, Tramps, Migratory Workers and Those on the Fringes of Society, with Their Uses and Origins, with a Number of Tramp Songs, Edited, with Essays on the Slang and the Songs. With a Terminal Essay on American Slang in Its Relation to English Thieves’ Slang, by Eric Partridge,” *American Speech* 9, no. 4 (1934): 303, <https://doi.org/10.2307/452198>.

We be gay for a little while: Black women, male strip clubs and placemaking

During the 1990s and early 2000s, it was not uncommon to see the Jit performed in male exotic clubs such as Henry's Palace, Watts, UBQ's, and Mozambique. As demonstrated in the video "Jitting Jesus – The Best Jit Ever"² posted to YouTube, dancers would perform solo or as a collective within these spaces. Traditionally dressed in athletic wear, many dancers elected to perform bare-chested to arouse women patrons and increase their tips. In the video, one can observe money being thrown onto the stage as jitters often served as transition acts between the sets of the male exotic dancers. Interestingly, a great Jitter (with or without a shirt on) is typically tipped as much as a great male exotic dancer which highlights the popularity and value of the Jit during this time.

A recent trip back to Henry's in 2021, revealed men were no longer the only gender allowed to perform in the club. The presence of women dancers in this traditionally male-dominated performance space not only queers the conventional heteronormative Black female gaze, but also redefines exotic performances and reshapes audience expectations.

In the documentary, *This One's for the Ladies* by Gene Graham, the audience witnesses Black women not only challenge what types of body should perform within male exotic strip clubs but also, what the response should be, and who it should come from. The first two subjects that the audience hears from in the film are two women named Poundcake and C-Pudding. The women are in Poundcake's kitchen frying chicken and making sandwiches while discussing their first encounters with the strip club.

² "JITTING JESUS - The Best Jit Ever - YouTube," accessed May 8, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BazzdULFK_0.

A few shots later, Blaze—a twenty-something, athletically built, brown skin woman, and the only female exotic dancer in the all-male strip club—is seen performing. Donning a large black cowboy hat and camouflage fatigue vest with two gold zippers across each breast, Blaze moves her body in a seductive manner as her pelvis performs a hip roll that ripples from the center of her body up through her chest. The shot then cuts back to a close-up of Poundcake as she states,

POUNDCAKE: I like the women too—

Like Lust, Blaze, they're gonna come.

Oh...Blaze is my favorite.

Oh my god! Uh. Clutching my pearls.

We be gay for a little while.

It's called the “change your life” crew.

*Whenever I'm in Baltimore, Philly, and
where else?*

Yes! And sometimes in New York, I'm gay. Yes.³

³ *This One's for the Ladies*, Documentary
(Determined Pictures, 2019).

Poundcake's response of "we be gay for a little while" demonstrates how male exotic strip clubs become a space of placemaking where Black women create new pathways for engaging and identify with one's sexuality. In the film, the audience learns that Poundcake is married with kids. She refers to her husband as 'Big Daddy,' and her favorite male dancer Raw, as her "fiancé of the club." She continues, "That's 'lil daddy,'"—referring to Raw—and "this is 'big daddy,'" referring to her husband.

Poundcake's reference to 'lil daddy' and 'big daddy,' as well as her statement, "we be gay for a little while," suggest an expansive way of sexual being and visioning for Black women. Poundcake's comments challenge heteronormative structures of dyadic sexuality and sexual being by subverting the female gaze that is supposedly reserved for the male exotic body within this space, to the female exotic body. Furthermore, she illustrates that her participation within this illusory sexual experience is not fixed but fluid since she is only "gay for a little while" — demonstrating her ability to exercise agency as she moves between her heterosexual marriage and her attraction to women. Like Blaze's seamless hip rolls and rocking pelvic movements, Poundcake's sexual attraction to women moves harmoniously beyond Newark to Baltimore, Philly, and New York as she travels to see Blaze's performances—demonstrating its boundless geographic reach.



Dance, Identity, and the Lineage within Black Social Dance

Melanie George

As an artist, thinker, writer, and educator specializing in jazz dance, Melanie George centers the West African roots of jazz dance via the historically-informed technique, Neo-Jazz. From 2016-2020, she was the Dramaturg / Audience Educator at Lumberyard, making her the only full-time institutional dramaturg for dance in the USA, and she is honored to be among the dramaturgs affiliated with Urban Bush Women's Choreographic Center.

My engagement with Black social dance originates from my upbringing in the household of Melvin George, born March 5th, 1935, in Michigan, and deceased on September 4th, 2020, in West Bloomfield. In this household, bebop was revered above all musical forms, making jazz the soundtrack of both Melvin's and my own youth. Jazz, specifically Miles Davis's "Bitches Brew," informed much of my early sensibilities.

The historical resonance of jazz within my personal experience led to a formalized exploration of jazz dance and improvisation as a graduate student at American University in 2001. Improvisation, a requirement for virtuosity, had been notably absent from my earlier formal training, thereby presenting jazz not merely as a form but as a discipline demanding a constant engagement with spontaneous creativity. My roles have since expanded beyond performance into dramaturgy, curation, and advocacy—each significantly informed by the ethos of jazz formations.

A pivotal moment in my practice was the return to the stage after a twelve-year hiatus as a performer in Latasha Barnes' "The Jazz Continuum," a piece actively touring since the fall of 2022. This return marked an introspective acknowledgment of my duality as a dancer trained predominantly in white environments, yet rooted firmly in a Black familial and communal dance traditions experienced through reunions, picnics, and house parties. This dichotomy has inevitably shaped my approach to curating performances at Jacob's Pillow, actively seeking to stage dances of the African diaspora and social dancing within traditional concert stages.

This personal trajectory informs my current understanding of jazz as fundamentally communal, collaborative, reciprocal, and essentially a social endeavor. Yet, after years of advocating for diverse dance forms under the jazz umbrella—including hip-hop and house—I find myself questioning the very frameworks I have perpetuated. Specifically, I critique the jazz family tree model for its limited utility in contemporary discourse, given the proliferation of dance styles claiming jazz heritage without necessarily adhering to its historical or stylistic tenets.

In response to this inadequacy, I propose a provisional framework consisting of varying degrees of connection to jazz: jazz proper, jazz-adjacent, jazz-informed, jazz-influenced, jazz-inspired, and finally, not jazz. These categories are deliberately loose, reflecting the fluidity and complexity inherent in dance styles like hip-hop and house, which contain jazz core elements but may evolve into distinct forms and dialects.

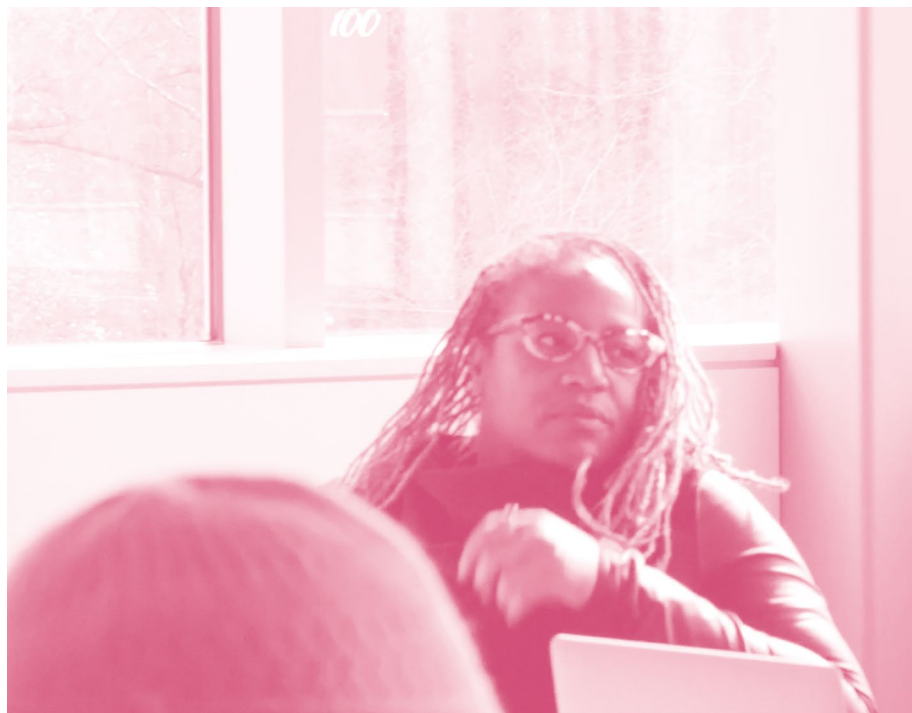
This framework is both personal and critical, as it interrogates my positionality within the lineage of jazz and Black social dance. The question arises: where exactly do I fit in? Having often trained in environments disconnected from authentic Black dance traditions yet constantly an advocate for them, this internal tension culminated in my recognition of gatekeeping—not only of others but of myself. In recognizing the limitations of such gatekeeping, I am compelled to reclaim the Blackness embedded within my own dance legacy, identifying ancestors outside traditional jazz canons such as Jojo Smith, Frank Hatchet, and Liz Williamson.

Another essential dimension of this inquiry is the sociality inherent in jazz. Reflecting upon the Detroit-based television shows, "The Scene" and its successor "The New Dance Show," I am reminded of the formative influences from my youth: commercials explicitly embedded within my memory as cultural touchstones.

These early impressions highlight how essential it was for me to see Black people dancing together. Sociality was and is an inherent act of resistance and transformation. A recent residency in Akron brought together dancers Michelle McPhee, Jasmine Hearn, Lauren Petty White, and me, in order for each to practice our deep improvisational expertise and represent diverse yet interconnected strands within Black dance traditions. Collaborating with them created a space for exploring jazz beyond movement specificity, allowing us all to embrace an expansive ethos that transcends genre constraints.

Central to these investigations is also the recognition of jazz musicians who long ago embraced the tenets of the avant-garde, like Ornette Coleman and Cecil Taylor. These musicians epitomize a jazz orientation liberated from rigid formal structures; a sentiment I aspire to parallel within my dance-making strategies. The intersection between the social club environments, and concert stages constitutes a critical juncture in my work. Bridging this divide remains a constant pursuit, informing my artistic and educational practices.

These inquiries are not entirely new but are currently pressing in their urgency, given my frequent navigation between multiple worlds and the perpetual desire to challenge my own artistic choices. This advocacy is driven by a belief in community and my own questions about how avant-garde expressions in jazz can remain accessible and nourishing to broader social dance communities. Collaborations with artists like Michelle McPhee, founder of Ladies of Hip Hop, underscore my lifelong commitment to this community-based approach. Ultimately, my engagement with jazz and Black social dance is about grappling with inherited traditions, pushing against the limitations of categorization, and foregrounding the social and communal at the heart of jazz.



Black social event

Imani Kai Johnson

Dr. Imani Kai Johnson is an interdisciplinary scholar, specializing in the African diaspora, global popular culture, and Hip Hop. As the founder, chair, and sole Artistic Director of the Show & Prove Hip Hop Studies Conference Series, Dr. Johnson's work on Hip Hop extends to cultivating sites for Hip Hop scholars to speak to one another and to a knowing Hip Hop community to foster the growth of Hip Hop Studies as a field that is responsible to communities beyond the academy.

I spent my last semester of undergrad on an exchange to the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill campus in Barbados, and lived a life that took me out dancing multiple times a week with friends around Bridgetown. This was my main (and favorite) form of socializing, and in many ways was my approach to being in a new place and getting culturally oriented. As someone who prioritized music whether studying, cleaning, or chilling, the new and sometimes familiar music I was exposed to on the radio offered a distinct soundtrack to my experiences whether I understood the lyrics or not. Yet, as much as I loved it, I struggled in the beginning to dance to it. For the first time in my life, I felt rhythmless. I just didn't know how to move in the groove of the music and the shared experience on the dancefloor. And while I'm a fan of the concept of "dancing like no one is looking," I didn't like the idea of being seen as and feeling vulnerably off beat. This was a foreign feeling to me, and I was compelled to fix it immediately.

One night, during a reggae and dancehall party at an open air club, I remember at some point being so tired of feeling out of sync that I whisper-shouted above the music to a tall man next to me, "What part of the song are you dancing to?" It was a weird question in retrospect, but I loved how he moved, his eyes-closed-head-shaking-dreadlocks-bouncing revelry in time with the music. I could feel his connection to it, but I couldn't sense how to get there myself. He accommodated me with a simple reply shouted back to me: "The bass." It was all I needed. It gave me a way to listen and move, though differently than I had been accustomed. Weeks later I would get another lesson. At my first live soca concert and in the midst of a hyped-up sweaty throng of fans, I got schooled in how to wine my waist from the young man behind me who patiently guided my too-slow backside.

It took a few tries before I could keep up the pace, and even then I didn't yet have the stamina to keep it up for more than a song. Falling in and out of sync with the music indicated that I was still learning, yet nonetheless the experience gifted me with the visceral pleasure of a collective dancing bodily conversation through the music.

That experience held a lot of firsts for me: the first time living out of the US, my first time in a majority Black country, my first time feeling very American. I was thrilled and self-conscious, foreign and connected, exhilarated in my independence and decidedly missing the familiarities of home. Diaspora went from an idea and a personal cultural-political outlook to a lived and embodied experience wherein music and dancing played central roles. My journey with Black social dance would start with Hip Hop and R&B (in my pre-teen years), and would eventually move to include a little bit of go-go, reggae, soca and salsa (in college), then house and afrobeat (while in grad school). I accumulated a kind of diasporic understanding across contexts and over time, which resulted in my increasing recognition of practices that, while they did not always align technically, felt related. In light of my subsequent research into Hip Hop streetdances, a sense of connection was all the more evident, an extension of sorts of having embodied a range of underlying Africanist aesthetic principles by way of each new genre of dance, each offering insight about moving with others in the music.

When asked to define Black social dances / dancing in a conversation about this publication, I came back to these memories of difference and maybe even failure, perhaps because they captured the complications of any attempt to encapsulate such a term. What became evident in my research was that, beyond a philosophy of beauty, the range of Africanist aesthetics activated in any of these particular Black social dances functioned as a kind of

umbilical cord; conduits of exchange amongst a rich body of diasporic dances that remain connected despite distinctions in the conditions and contexts that called forth such practices in the first place. So, for something like Hip Hop, Africanist aesthetics made evident that there was so much more happening than just what was or is deemed popular. In fact, one of the things my book¹ attempted to do was name that connection by way of specific Africanist aesthetics that bridged a Hip Hop practice (specifically breaking cyphers) to the diaspora and Black radical traditions and practices of survival and liberation, by way of the ritual circle. During my research, it became evident in interviews with Black streetdancers when I asked them, “What was your first cypher?” Oftentimes they responded with examples from dancing in family settings or at gatherings with that spanned generations. Their relationship to cyphering preceded Hip Hop, and the circle was a seemingly organic occurrence that tied their already-present cultural orientation to the world to Hip Hop.

Insofar as Black social dances carry, at the very least, histories, epistemologies, and modes of Black sociality,² blackness persists in a subversive resistance to the normative demands of an anti-Black world that seeks to reduce these forms to mere spectacles for entertainment and commodity consumption, especially in light of their popularity around the world.

¹ *Dark Matter in Breaking Cyphers: the Life of Africanist Aesthetics in Global Hip Hop* (New York: Oxford University Press) 2023.

² Or, as Ashon Crawley puts it, “the grounding wires of black social dance [...] is nothing other than black sociality.” In “Otherwise Movements,” *The New Inquiry* 19 (Jan 2015).

In other words, the power and seeming magic of Black social dances / dancing is that those lessons get communicated in the palpably joyous, rigorously physical, and expressly collective practices that touch the sacred and even a sense of freedom. Thus, Black social dancing defies any effort to encapsulate it in a singular idea, genre, experience, or definition.

Instead, they evolve from what was, building out of long-standing traditions; in any given moment they embody some dimension of what life is in the particularities of a given time period; and they always also imagine and perform into existence the possibilities of what could be, whether for a moving body, a dancing community, or our broader social futures. And what could be is wide open.



Section 3

Black Queer Dance Aesthetics: In the Case of Atlanta

September 27-28, 2024

Spelman College, Atlanta GA

convened by Webster B. McDonald





Dancing in Darktown

Julie B. Johnson

Julie B. Johnson, PhD, is a dance artist and educator whose work centers on participatory dance and embodied memory mapping to amplify the histories, lived experiences, and bodily knowledge of Black women as a strategy towards collective liberation for all. She earned a PhD in Dance Studies at Temple University's Boyer College of Music and Dance, researching meanings and experiences of 'community' in Philadelphia-based West African Dance classes.

At the Black Queer Social Dance Symposium in Atlanta I presented excerpts of my emerging research titled “Dancing in Darktown: An Abolition-Feminism Take on Black Social Dance in Progressive Era Atlanta.” At the center of this research was searching for the voices of dancing ancestors in city records from the turn of the twentieth century. This work affirms an understanding of Black social dance as a deep and vast landscape of shared experiences of people across the diaspora, moving collectively together in all kinds of places wherever dance shows up – on the dance floor in a club, in a church, a friend’s basement, a community center, or out on the streets.

My “Dancing in Darktown” research is focused on the dancing experience of Black Atlantans in dance halls, dives, and ballrooms between 1890–1920, and their relationship to the city’s carceral politics of the time. This period is known as the Ragtime Era (characterized by jaunty piano music, vaudeville theatre and minstrelsy, to put it reductively), as well as the Progressive Era (a time of significant economic reforms, but also the emergence of Jim Crow laws and the proliferation of the convict leasing system, followed by the chain gang).¹ The more I culled through archival material, the more I realized how intertwined these historical perspectives are. This intertwining, the entanglement of dance and carcerality, often played out on the dance floor. My offering to the symposium attendees was a visual representation of my journey through the archives with photos of historical newsclips, city council meetings, and police records, sourced from Atlanta History Center’s Kenan Research Center and various online digital archive databases.

¹ According to Sarah Haley, author of *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, convict leasing is a system of labor exploitation and state violence that builds on the legacy of slavery through “captivity, abjection, and gendered capitalism,” (2016, 4).

“Down in the Dance Halls of Decatur Street”

My research collaborator, Victoria Lemos, who is a historian, tour guide, and host of the Archive Atlanta podcast nudged me in the direction of dance halls after sending me a historical newsclip article titled, “Down in the Dance Halls of Decatur Street,” with a tagline that reads “Notorious dives and dens where the pool tables are center of attraction and ragtime reigns supreme.”² The article reviews Black social dance spaces in the area known as “Darktown” at the time, or what is now the Edgewood Ave, Decatur St., and Auburn Avenue neighborhoods of Atlanta. The news clip describes the spaces in Darktown along a spectrum, from low-class dives, to middle-class dance halls, to elite ballrooms. It is one of many articles that make a connection between dance halls and policing in Atlanta, and like many of the others, it excludes the perspectives or voices of folks who danced on these dance floors.

Dancing in Darktown uncovered archival materials – police reports, city council meeting minutes, and business petitions – that make visible the entanglements of Black social dance and racial politics, particularly the ways in which Black dance halls and other businesses were targeted by city officials and systematically shut down. For example, in response to Charles Turner’s petition to open a dance hall on Edgewood Avenue, Atlanta Mayor Charles A. Collier labeled dance halls as “breeders of vice and crime,” and vowed to shut them down once and for all.³

² “Down in the Dives of Decatur Street.” *The Atlanta Constitution*. July 13, 1902, 1.

³ City Council Minutes and Index, Volume 17, 1897, September-1899 May. Location: Row 5, Section C, Shelf 4. City of Atlanta Records, Kenan Research Center at Atlanta History Center.

Subsequent mayors followed suit by rejecting petitions for new Black dance halls and shutting down existing ones. By 1906, according to the *Atlanta Constitution* newspaper, a bill was passed making explicitly clear the agenda to marginalize Black recreation and business, and put more power in the hands of white land owners:

“...no dance halls or other place of amusement shall be allowed within 2 miles of a town in any county [sic] of more than eighty thousand population without a permit signed by a majority of the landowners of the town near which it is proposed to establish it. The bill was framed to doctor and abolish certain negro parks in close proximity to Atlanta.”⁴

News Media & Dancing Stars in Cahoots?

The majority of the Atlanta-based newspaper articles published between 1890–1920 that I have encountered thus far follow the trend of reporting on Black dance halls through the lens of crime, focusing on police raids and mass arrests. Titles include “37 Arrested at One time,” “Drunken Negroes Carouse,” “Cake Walkers in the Police Court,” and “Wild Excitement When Police Raid Dance Hall,”

⁴ “Gossip of Men and Measures Prominent in Legislature,” *The Atlanta Constitution*. July 10, 1906, 7.

to name a few. The abundance of such reporting likely supported white supremacist narratives that crime was all that took place at these sites, that Black dance hall patrons were inclined towards criminal behavior, and/or that Black recreation was dangerous. Black recreation, including dancing, fits this description. Any perceived deviant behavior undermined the notion of control over Black bodies existing solely for labor, particularly for Black women whose domestic labor (such as laundering the clothes of white people throughout the city) occurred at such a large scale that it propped up local economies in the South. Black women's perceived utility, and any deviation from it, excluded them from hegemonic renderings of femininity, womanhood, or even personhood.

As I follow curiosities about how my artistic research practice might align with the praxis of abolition feminism – to address state sanctioned gendered violence, systemic inequities, and social conditions that lead to harm; and build strategies and resources for a new and more liberated future – I find great possibility in the study of Ragtime-era dance halls and Black social dance. How might our dancing ancestors' experience help us glean strategies for understanding, navigating, and resisting carcerality?

Dancing in Darktown collaborators dance with audience members joyfully and defiantly next to an image of Vernon and Irene Castle's "Suggestions for Correct Dancing" projected onto a screen at Ernie's in the Cut. Ernest Hood (aka DJ EZ\$) is in the background, behind the DJ booth, wearing sunglasses.

DOWN IN THE DANCE HALLS OF DECATUR STREET

Notorious Dives and Dens Where the Pool Tables Are Center of Attraction and Ragtime Music Reigns Supreme



Two Flashlight Photographs of a Ball Room on Decatur Street—Taken by Vollberg, Staff Photographer

Dancing in Darktown: An Abolition-Feminism Take on Black Social Dance in Progressive Era Atlanta



are painfully emphatic. Only the "elite" of Darktown can enter these halls, and cigarettes and razors are barred. There is a grotesque exaggeration of politeness, and affectation runs riot with the dance.

"Will you give me the distinguished pleasure, Miss Mandy, of leading you through the wazy waltz?" some Darktown bean will ask, and he will be told:

"Mister Jones, it will be my most delightful experience of this evening's function to allow you to dance this waltz with me."

The contrast between the reckless abandon of the "dive" and the skillful and pompous stiles of the small dance hall is striking. And after all there is more amusement in seeing the discovery of the "dive" "cut the pigeon wing" and do the "double shuffle" than to look upon the highest set.

Of course this list does not include the private dances by the more respectable negroes in the city. It is only about the public dance halls, which are more or less under police surveillance, that I write.

Where They Play Pool.

If the Darktown citizen does not care for the dance, but wishes to leave his family at home and spend the evening for his own pleasure (like many who do not live in Darktown, alas) he seeks a pool room. I do not think there are any billiard tables. The negro pool player shoves a cue at the balls as if his whole life depended upon it. Some of the players are very good shots, considering the kind of balls they have to use. It is

Primary Sources

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What is Black Social Dance?

Ra/Malika Imhotep

Ra Malika Imhotep, ph.d (Ra/They/Them/doll) is an ancestor-accountable living thinker whose work aspires to further the traditions of revolutionary black feminisms and black diasporic theorizing. Born and bred in Atlanta, GA, they are currently serving community as an Assistant Professor of Global African Diaspora Studies at Spelman College; they hold a PhD in African Diaspora Studies and New Media Studies from the University of California-Berkeley.

To me, the black in black social dance is diasporic, the social is communal, and the dance is movement. So, I think of it as a way of embodied gathering where all different kinds of blacknesses get to collaborate and inform each other. And when I think of Black social dance, I want to say like dance in its most expansive sense, like how do we play into and against each other?

Dance is a form of play with all of its poles, positive, negative, up, down, dynamic, static in and with blackness. In my own work I've had the impulse to try to track down origins, asking: so where did this come from? And I think where I've arrived is that similar conditions devise similar movements. So, it might not be that we were all in Angola moving in this way and then we got to Cuba and then we got to New Orleans. It might be, right? And that might be part of it, you know, survivals and retentions, but I think also about South Carolina, like if you're in a similarly conditioned area, ecologically, socially, there are movement practices and forms of gathering that will be similar just because the social-cultural conditions are similar, so dispersed but connected.

I just started to think through the geographic and social spatial dimensions of my work, and I think about, not only black dance institutions but the way that something like the juke joint, the juke isn't just a physical space, it's also movements (word to Zora Neale Hurston and Katrina Hazzard-Donald). The framework for my ideas and for what I hope is my book project is what I am calling "the Tar Baby principle." What's this? What's this inside of? *This tar baby principle embraces the black trickster-feminine in southern art & performance.* And I'll give you an abbreviated version of the tale that inspires it—Fox is out to catch Br'er rabbit. Br'er Rabbit is our archetypal trickster and he's canonically read as masculine. In order to catch Br'er Rabbit, Fox makes up this sticky black figure, "*sassy az a 'jay bird*" which I read as a feminized instrumentality.

In grad school, there was a new media course where I got the language of “spread of participatory culture” as defined by the scholar Henry Jenkins. So much about “virality” or “going viral” implies an invitation into a kind of passive spraying of contagious content. Whereas “spread” evokes an active engagement in media consumption and sharing and a kind of searching out that is almost akin to a research process. I’m not sure how much “spread” we are seeing in this micro-media economy (TikTok, IG Reels, etc). There are unprecedented amounts of “viral” content being passively scrolled by, laughed at and shared.

These contemplations of popular culture and media circulation led me to a critical inquiry around a media phenomenon close to my heart and hips, the Twerk Video. And I would say this is a form of media in which participants are actively engaging perhaps inspired by arousal and attraction and through that somatic experience, inspired to share, or mimic, or any other combinations of internal and external gestures.

In the video “Fuck You All The Time,” folk-performance-artist BeTTy BuTT wore leopard print leggings, a black tank top and an intentionally exposed red bra with lace details. The heavily edited video, directed by King Tatum, is paired with a deliberately sexy and haunting chorus. Through the sentiments of an insatiable sexuality articulated in this chorus, I am reaching for a way of seeing that I can do right by the destructive and irresistible qualities of black feminine figures. Being-in-blackfeminineflesh.

How do we know the erotic life of the flesh when we see it? Twerk Videos offer insight into the impact of working-class southern life in the 99s and 2000s, especially in the urban centers of New Orleans, Atlanta, and Miami. These shape global understandings and practices of black feminine figures (once while volunteering in Ghana a group of black male artists I was in community with excitedly asked me questions about twerking). These social choreographies of the erotic offered in spreadable social media content cast spirited performances of the lives of the “urban” black south counter-public. This counter-public is shaped by traumas of systemic racism, ecological dispossession, disaster, sexual and social precarity, and patriarchal violence.

These performances elicit a method of reading that is sensitive to the broader range of sensations stirred in the process of witnessing a body akin to yours mobilize all this shit. And so, a lot of my work is a methodological experiment, but it also, comes from a deep desire to take what is close to me seriously.

At first, I was thinking about a concept of “the urban afro-femme”. Then I was thinking about, the ways that very much showed up in media and popular culture in West Africa. And because of the way Covid interrupted my writing and thinking about the South, I was brought brought to site sit squarely within the site of New Orleans (which is where I was sheltered-in-place), which brought back how, as an adolescent in Atlanta, I experienced post-Katrina migration and cultural spread in 2005.

I have a vivid memory of being at a cafeteria at my deliberately Black middle school and learning how to twerk from the two black femme peers that had just migrated or been dispossessed from New Orleans. So, when I reference the spread of Black social dance that emanates from ecological dispossession, that's what I'm talking about. And I am also thinking about all the fights the that broke out in Atlanta high schools as or our dirty southern cousins sought terf to fit in their new surroundings.

This space of black sociality where erotic movement and intramural violence dance together, calls us into a black performance study of the dirt. That's an invitation to bear witness to the fleshy, messy movements, misunderstandings, and embodied translation that make black social life across the African Diaspora. I have argued elsewhere that being marked by a black femininity is a queer condition that destabilizes projections made about what gender signifies and can be made to signify by the performative processes of black bodies. I believe, with folks like Cathy Cohen and C Riley Snorton, that there are political stakes mobilized in these acts of exaggerating and refusal that are spread in both live moments of social content AND virtual practices of consumption and exchange.

[B]lackness embodies a sensual social geography. If this is an African tradition, a tradition brought over on them ships, what does it mean to sensually engage, and perhaps actively spread, the social movement and disordering of gender catalyzed through the middle passage?





A Gen X Tale of Black Social Dance in Phoenix, AZ

Raquel Monroe

Dr. Raquel Monroe is an interdisciplinary performance scholar, artist, administrator and mother whose research interests include Black social dance, queer black feminisms, popular culture and the efficacy of collaboration to create social change. Monroe's scholarship appears in journals and anthologies on race, sexuality, dance and popular culture. Monroe realizes her passion for collaboration as a member of Propelled Animals, an interdisciplinary arts collective who create site-responsive, multimedia live performances that interrogate, challenge and ultimately attempt to dismantle the systemic "isms" of oppression.

I am not being hyperbolic when I say that much of what I know about Black feminism, Black love, and liberation I learned in adolescence dancing at parties and clubs with my girlfriends. That is, Black feminism in all its iterations was embodied, preverbal and birthed in the rituals of getting ready, arriving, dancing, and departing these spaces. These rituals instilled in us principles of care, love, pleasure, and collective pride in our Blackness and femme-ness. To be Black, proud and regard yourself as worthy of pleasure, and attention, let alone beautiful, was a defiant act of love and resistance to predatory capitalism, racist ideals of beauty, and the ongoing threat of gendered violence in the 1980s in Phoenix, AZ.

I must've been around seven or eight years old, I think I was in Virginia for the summer dancing with my cousins, who were from Jersey, and I distinctly remember my parents glancing at one another, and someone must've said it aloud, "that's what we get for moving to Phoenix, AZ" or something like "What did we expect raising her around white people?" My seeming lack of rhythm had them questioning their choices. Over the years something changed. I found rhythm in the seeming simplicity of social dances that isolated body parts. Aunt Rosie, my mom's bestie, so my play aunt, taught us these dances she learned from her late weekends of exploring Phoenix's Black nightlife. Dances like the Rock performed to Michael Jackson's Rock with You. MJ's melodic, sweet voice gently swayed my hips side to side, as I nestled my elbows against my waist and snapped my fingers to the beat. The Rock gracefully transitioned into the Jordache. Instead of rocking the hips side to side, this dance required you to move your shoulders back and forth, encouraging a slight see-saw action in the waist. And my Aunt Rosie's favorite, the "Wave," just simply making a wave with your right hand in the air to the beat, while saying "haayy!"

My first dance with mostly Black kids was on Luke Air Force Base in Phoenix, Arizona. I was 11 and in the 6th grade. I was nervous. I knew that Black kids have rhythm and know how to dance. I wasn't sure I did. I was cool around my mixed group of Black, Chicana and white friends, but around all Black kids, urgh, not sure. The dim, what might have been a cleared-out cafeteria dwarfed our adolescent bodies, but the deejay spinning Prince's 1999, Patric Russian's Forget Me Nots, and The Gap Band's "You dropped the bomb on me, baby! You dropped the bomb on me." Just like Adam and Eve, you set me free" filled the room with the "Black music" hits of 1982. I watched with envy as groups of pony-tailed girls confidently formed small circles and subtly rode the rhythm together, while boys goofily orbited around them. This was decades before the capacity to skillfully isolate and bounce your hips in all directions measured your skill as a dancer. My friend, Shantal dragged me to the floor, and I eased through my jitters. These were her friends, and she was in junior high, so not nervous at all. I achieved the first hurdle—making it to the floor without drawing unnecessary attention.

The exhilaration I felt at that first dance, deciding what to wear, fretting over my freshly pressed hair, subconscious about how my body moving through space will clock my Blackness, transformed into confidence once me and my crew emerged as the leaders of the line on the Gold Rush Dance floor in the late eighties. It took us years of rehearsal to arrive as queens of the teen club dance pack. It took me and Marlo going to Mercuries at twelve years old and walking off the dance floor when "O" and "V" started their pop locking routine instead of dancing with us. They were breaking the heteronormative expectations—boys dance with girls, not with each other. They can practice their routines at home, like the rest of us. It took me, Johnsie, Jennifer, Marlo, and sometimes Renata waiting for boys to ask us to dance to Request

Line and Kurtis Blow, at sketchy ass Struts. Shout out to WRST, Phoenix's own World Renown Scratching Team. I still consider them one of the greatest deejay crews to ever exist. It took more wallflowering at Tommy's and Confetti's, but by now we knew more Black boys from across The Valley of the Sun, who like us, were desperate to dance with other Black kids in the city. So, by the time we arrived at the Gold Rush in 1987–88 we were seasoned and popular. We had an array of partners to choose from and by dancing with them we got to dance with each other. Cue the club scene in *Girls Trip*, we had routines, baby.

Our lives mirrored the depictions of school dances and parties featured in films like *The Wood*, and *House Party* which depicted Black teen life in the eighties and early nineties. Awkward, horny, boys working up the courage to ask nonchalantly, feigning disinterest, insecure girls to dance, or fierce dancing girls performing their routines on the floor nostalgically perform my memories. We were the last generation of teen clubs in Phoenix, Arizona. Crack cocaine, guns, and capitalism finally claimed the desert, as they had every metropolitan area in Regan's U.S.A. Safety, and the fact that the clubs made more money selling alcohol than entertaining children ended teen nightclubs in The Valley. But none of that mattered, because Arizona State University provided new party grounds.

In 1988, of the approximately 42,000 students at Arizona State University, 646 were Black. We clung to each other and every weekend we danced, hard. Hip-hop, West Coast rap, and eighties R&B invited hetero dyads to the dance floor to Roger Rabbit, Bart Simpson, and Cameo—the popular dances of time, while the Divine 9 walked the party, “Skee wee!” But at the end of the night, when the deejay, a Detroit native, introduced this cacophony of disco–gospel–R&B with bass sounding music to the West Coast, Chicago kids flooded the floor with infectious exuberance.

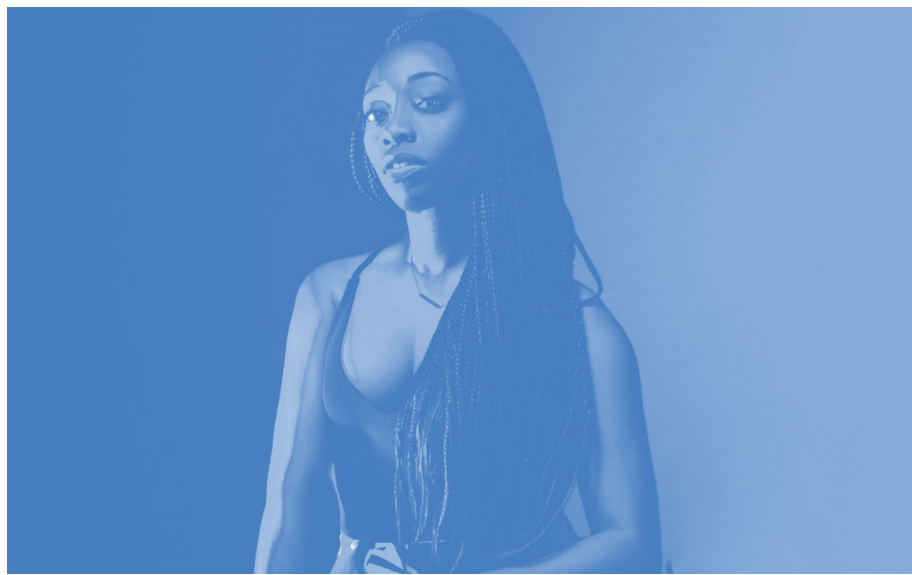
We cleared the floor so they could house. House music introduced a new way of existing on the dance floor, existing in the world. As accustomed as we were to partner dancing, dancing without a partner felt awkward. Freedom often does.

My summers in New Jersey reinforced this new phenomenon of dancing with just a group of girls. I spent two summers on the NJT commuting from Jersey to NYC to study at Ailey School, and me and my fake I.D. fell into the Jersey house scene. It was confusing as hell to see mobs of people just dancing. House music created formations of bodies that weren't constrained by the heteronormative rules that required a partner of the opposite sex to gain access to the dance floor. I lowkey missed the established expectations of social dancing as I understood it, and predictable music with words to which I could sing along. Yet, I did not miss waiting to be asked to dance. I negotiated this cognitive dissonance in my body and did not resolve it for years to come.

House music did not linger in the West, and our clubs continued to reinforce heteronormative mating rituals, though I did not call it that at the time. Fast forward a few decades, I'm still clubbing in Los Angeles and Phoenix, cuz that's what I do. I dance every weekend as a practice, and I was growing weary of waiting to be asked. Waiting for a man to ask me to do anything did not fit with my now articulate Black feminist sensibilities. I finally told my sister and girlfriends, "I'm not doing this anymore." "Let's just dance," and we occupied the dance floor together, risking looking like "white girls" cuz we were promptly told by another friend, "that's what white girls do," or "that's kinda lezzy."

I remember people staring at us, confused. We were queering this heteronormative space for Black dancing bodies. It was something so simple yet profound—to claim space for us and challenge the policing of our bodies. Finally, my feminist ethos informed my social dance practice, and erased decades of waiting for permission to dance.

In hindsight, I realize we Black Gen Xers are the last generation of contemporary, heteronormative Black partner dancing. I have complicated feelings about this. I fear that dancing with someone is becoming a lost social practice. Yes, Steppers are gonna step, but I hear women, from Millennials to Baby Boomers, mourn the days when men would ask a woman to dance. They miss the structure and well-established rules of conduct. They confess that they enjoy line dances because “the men don’t dance anymore, and I’m not going to dance with a bunch of women.” The homophobia is blatant, and gazing across the dance floors of my yesteryear, it has always been so, and yet those dance floors have also performed/masked queerness in plain sight. The young Black boys turned grown Black men who were once my favorite dance partners are now out and proud. As for me, I shun the line. I still prefer the face to face, improvisational call and response of dancing with my homegirls, or whoever is willing to dance with me.



Remembering Freaknik

CiCi Kelley

CiCi Kelley, a dynamic force in the world of performance arts, has etched her presence across diverse stages, be it in theaters, studios, concert venues, or even on the vibrant canvas of a football field. Hailing from Atlanta, GA Kelley serves as a Senior Lecturer for the and Director of Spelman Dance Theatre at her alma mater, Spelman College.

Atlanta Yeek culture, ragtime, and the Bankhead Bounce all originated from residential neighborhoods within the City of Atlanta. What I find particularly intriguing is how these cultural movements relate to Dr. Julie B. Johnson's work "Dancing in Darktown: An Abolition-Feminism Take on Black Social Dance in Progressive Era Atlanta," specifically regarding the silencing of Black celebration, fellowship, dance, and joy. Reflecting on Freaknik, an extraordinary gathering of Blackness, emerged in the late 80s and early 90s. I'll never forget it. It was a time to be had in Atlanta, Georgia, to celebrate all things Black freedom and fellowship. Although I was a pre-teen during the height of Freaknik, the anticipation in the city was palpable.

Every spring, Atlanta would transform into a literal parking lot due to gridlocked traffic, street hustlers, snake chambers, and Daisy Duke short shorts. Initially, the event was a gathering of Greek sororities and fraternities, along with students from the Atlanta University Center (AUC). People traveled from all over just to have a ball, cruise down Peachtree Street, and enjoy the vibrant atmosphere of the city. The magic of Freaknik exploded because there was no container for it, no official structure to limit its energy. From Box Chevy's to every old school ride imaginable, city streets transformed into arteries of headlights and thumping 808 bass music. Freaknik was meant to be an open celebration, a time to unwind with classmates and let off some steam.

However, as the 90s progressed, the event began to take on a more chaotic and violent energy, prompting state containment and stricter regulations within the city. Though understandable to an extent due to safety concerns not associated with the original intention of Freaknik; once again, whenever there is a celebration of Blackness, there always seems to be a "need" to silence it.

Much of what transpired during the later part of Freaknik's decline in the 90's, was frightening within the de-centered evolution of the event, particularly when it involved the policing of Blackness, due to the South's reputation of violence amongst young Black folk. Authorities would intentionally reroute traffic, preventing participants from exiting the highways, within the Buckhead & Midtown section of Atlanta. Specifically, they would block the exits along the downtown corridor of I-75 and I-85, making it impossible to enter the city. This was done quietly yet strategically. Given Atlanta's history of partisan closures, a curfew was enacted, restricting gatherings to conclude by 3:00 a.m.; when Atlanta was notoriously known as a party town until the break of dawn.

“...Now the clubs close at 3, and it feels like Atlanta died...”

Atlanta Rapper Big Zak (Wallace) who is also the founder of The Local Green. Show intro to the Greg Street Radio show from the early 00's.

By the 00's, in response to these restrictions, the practice of cruising emerged. Instead of assembling in clubs or parking lots, I remember seeing & participating in waves of cars cruising from the West End Mall all the way to Peachtree St. in a consequential attempt to enjoy and fellowship amongst friends and onlookers. When you arrive closer to Peachtree St., which leads you directly into Buckhead, the traffic would be so thick. I remember being in my father's Infiniti Q45, rolling down the windows, with Lil John or Youngbloods blasting through the speakers. The once-upon-a-time street party, turned into the confines of your car, and compartmentalized fellowship amongst other riders within their vehicle. It was surreal, yet still quite enjoyable.

While this was happening, you'd drive through and see the city, which became an issue. The traffic we experience today is very reminiscent of what cruising was like. Cruising then became a legal issue for the state. Much of it was definitely systemic in terms of how blackness had to be controlled and dismissed. The way the club scene looks now, or the dance halls (and there aren't that many left), is partly due to the restrictions on the gathering of black people. Notably, these restrictions on black gatherings coincided with the forced movement of clubs away from the city to make way for a new redevelopment plan for the downtown area. Gentrification of Big Mamma's house, the neighborhood candy lady, and even schools within predominantly Black neighborhoods, continues to plague the history of "Old Atlanta."

What I've captured here provides a crucial backdrop for the impact the state had on black social dance culture in Atlanta, the criminalization of the black social class, and the delayed arrival of black social life and desires.



What is Black Social Dance?

Anuli Akanegbu

Anuli Akanegbu is a cultural anthropologist and a researcher for Data & Society's Labor Futures program. Anuli earned her PhD in cultural anthropology from NYU in May 2024 following a successful career as a senior strategist and brand planner at the global public relations and marketing firm Edelman. Her primary research interests lie at the intersection of cultural anthropology, identity studies, history, and creative methodologies, focusing on labor and creative production.

Black social dance can be understood through four interconnected principles: connection, movement, play, and creativity. These dances constitute a distinct expressive language that challenges dominant cultural norms, asserting alternative ways of being through corporeal innovation. Central to this practice is Blackness – not as a biological essentialism but as a cultural and historical framework that shapes the rhythms, gestures, and spatial contexts of the form. This spatiality extends beyond physical environments such as dance halls and streets to digital platforms like TikTok and Instagram, where virtual embodiments of Black dance remain tethered to lived experiences in specific geographic contexts.

However, the mere act of Black individuals performing a movement does not inherently render the movement as a kind of “Black social dance.” The classification of what makes something a “Black social dance” resists rigid boundaries because even dances historically associated with White mimicry, such as the 19th-century cakewalk, were subverted by Black participants who infused them with an imperceptible yet unmistakable cultural inflection – a “swagger,” rooted in ancestral knowledge. This unspoken rhythmic intuition, inherited and collectively reimagined, transcends mimicry to become a mode of resistance and reinvention.

“Everyone’s a celebrity in Atlanta”: The Paradoxical Making of a Black Mecca

Guide Quotes

The “Black Mecca” narrative, while empowering, risks obscuring systemic inequities, such as the displacement of historic Black neighborhoods by gentrification.

In contemporary Atlanta, the “celebrity” axiom operates as a rebuttal to structural marginalization by asserting visibility in a city where Black residents navigate both hyper-recognition (as cultural icons) and erasure (as victims of displacement).

The Mythic Foundations of Atlanta’s Identity

Atlanta’s identity as a cultural and economic powerhouse of the American South is inextricably tied to myth-making and place-making. As such, Atlanta is a mythologized place where heritage, boosterism, collective imagination, and social stratification collide. The city’s rise as a “Black Mecca” reflects not just its material success but also the tension between its aspirational social progressivism and its stark socioeconomic realities. Drawing on historical analysis, literary critique, and ethnographic observations, I explore how Black Atlantans have navigated these contradictions through vernacular theories of place, particularly through the folk axiom that “*everyone is a celebrity in Atlanta.*” This phrase, while absent from formal academic discourse, encapsulates a localized ethos of dignity and self-determination that resists the city’s structural inequities.

Atlanta's postbellum reinvention was orchestrated by city boosters like Henry W. Grady, who marketed the city to Northern industrialists as a phoenix rising from the ashes of the Civil War. Grady's vision for a "New South," was framed as an economic modernization project that would foster racial harmony even as it belied the enduring realities of Jim Crow segregation and coercive labor regimes that supplanted chattel slavery. W.E.B. Du Bois, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), allegorized this tension through the Greek myth of Atalanta, warning that Atlanta's pursuit of "gold" risked erasing its moral compass. Du Bois' metaphor foreshadowed the city's paradox: its simultaneous reputation as a beacon of Black progress and as the nation's capital of income inequality. According to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau data, Atlanta leads major U.S. cities in income disparity, with Black median household incomes at one-third of White median household incomes. This reality complicates its "Mecca" moniker.

Chocolate Cities and the Poetics of Black Placemaking

The concept of the "chocolate city," popularized by Parliament's 1975 album, frames Atlanta as part of a broader Black geographic imagination. In a 2016 article published in the journal *Theory, Culture & Society*, Hunter and Robinson along with sociologist Mary Pattillo and African-American studies scholar Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor draw on the poetics of writers such as Zora Neale Hurston to define Black placemaking as the ability of residents to shift the otherwise oppressive geographies of a city into sites of play, pleasure, celebration, and politics. Amiri Baraka, in *Souls Grown Deep* (2000), locates Atlanta within the "Black Belt" as both a political capital and a cultural destination for the Black bourgeoisie.

Yet Baraka's critique – *"Does it seem strange that capitalists would call the center of their dominion The Capital?"* – underscores how Atlanta's mythos often serves elite interests, even as its vernacular cultures resist them.

"Everyone Is a Celebrity": Folk Theory as Resistance

During my anthropological fieldwork, the phrase "everyone is a celebrity in Atlanta" emerged for me as what Zora Neale Hurston would call a folk theory. Unlike New York's "make it anywhere" individualism, this ethos reflects collective assertions of personhood rooted in Black Southern traditions. Reverend William Holmes Borders' 1943 poem *"I AM SOMEBODY"* – which celebrated figures like Langston Hughes and Madame C.J. Walker – predated this idea, linking individual dignity to communal legacy. Similarly, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s insistence that *"all labor has dignity"* redefined worth beyond material metrics. In contemporary Atlanta, the "celebrity" axiom operates as a rebuttal to structural marginalization by asserting visibility in a city where Black residents navigate both hyper-recognition (as cultural icons) and erasure (as victims of displacement).

The Limits and Possibilities of Myth

Atlanta's myths are double-edged. The "Black Mecca" narrative, while empowering, risks obscuring systemic inequities, such as the displacement of historic Black neighborhoods by gentrification. Yet, as Christina Sharpe argues in *In the Wake* (2016), the capacity to "*imagine otherwise*" remains a radical act. The folk theory of universal celebrity exemplifies this, reframing Atlanta as a site where Black residents actively assert agency amid constraint. Atlanta leads U.S. metros in Black in-migration, suggesting its myths still hold aspirational power.

The folk theory "*everyone is a celebrity*" distills the complexity of Black Atlanta in a way that bridges the city's past and present. It is not a narrative of triumph nor is it a surrender to economic disenfranchisement. It is a testament to how Black Atlantans have long negotiated placemaking on their own terms. Future scholarship must center this kind of tacit knowledge to unravel the paradoxes of a Black Mecca that is paved in both gold and red clay.

Baraka, Amiri. *Souls Grown Deep: African Vernacular Art of the South*. 2000.

Borders, William Holmes. "I AM SOMEBODY." Wings Over Jordan radio message. 1943.

Brookings Institution. (2023). *Income Inequality in Atlanta*. Analysis of ACS data.

Du Bois, W.E.B. *The Souls of Black Folk*. 1903.

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Moving Photography, Re-enactment, and Queer Social Refusals from the Gully

Webster B. McDonald, PhD

Dr. Webster B. McDonald holds a BFA in Theatre Arts from the Edna Manley College School of Drama, A Master of Arts Degree from Emerson College, and a PhD in Theatre and Performance Studies from the University of Kansas. Dr. McDonald has presented scholarly works in the US, Iceland, Canada, the UK, and parts of the Caribbean. He is a co-author of the anthology *Dubbin Monodrama Anthology I: Black Masculinities in African Diaspora Theatre* (2019).

Photography, Pose and the Gully as Social Refusal

How might we understand the gully, the sewer, and queer gatherings as spaces of bare life—sites of abandonment and exposure, yet also as terrains of improvisational possibility? That is, how might such spaces point to an awareness of how queer life is constituted and regulated by norms, while also enabling an understanding of its institutionalization that opens up the potential to defy its supposed irreversibility? To reverse the gully's constitution (conceived as domains where queer Jamaicans are forcibly displaced and rendered abject, existing outside the "normative" contours of traditional housing) requires an alternative reading, perceiving its social agenda a locus of visibility and resistance, defying the state's attempt to maintain a coherent narrative of heteronormative nationalism. What I have done here is to use my own temporary departure from the gully (but doesn't ignore its ongoingness in Jamaica) by placing a different arrangement beside it to move toward queer futurity.



This photo taken on July 1, 2023 at the London Pride parade dances in a dialogic performative formation, transforming tableau into a lively queer aesthetics evoking a paradox of futurity and the struggle for freedom for many “gully” people in Jamaica.¹ The gully on the other hand doesn’t move the same way. It is a gathering of temporalities, a physical and symbolic representation of the exile faced by various queer individuals. The supposed tableauness of archives (like the one represented here) moves in a Black social dance formation which simultaneously activates freedom for me and the gully queens. The coolness of the pose enacts a radical adjustment of homophobia’s violent tempo—dissing the colonial tempo—making room for a constellation of corporeal authorization that translates to, in colloquial terms “mi a good gal you kyaa stop mi a bloodclaat.” To be present at my first pride parade on July 1, 2023 was an orientation toward the new human that Sylvia Wynter compels, a re-indexing of being that recasts my homosexuality as full human by default. Remediation through re-indexing (a different organization of life) begins when the excluded subject is brought to an awareness of his place in the human/non-human power differential. Therefore, I pose, I smile, I wonder because

¹ Alice Zoo, “Meet Jamaica’s LGBTQ Individuals Forced to Hide in Storm Drains,” *Feature Shoot*, August 16, 2016, <https://www.featureshoot.com/2016/08/meet-jamaicas-lgbtq-individuals-forced-to-hide-in-storm-drains/>.

it adjusts my relationship to a queer time that was deferred and suspended.

Remediation and Archival Repair

The impulse to re-count the past, is a desire to commit to re-mediating history—in this case, black queer social history in Jamaica in a way that reveals an embodied relationship with the archive as a site where multiple temporalities collide. This thought experiment centers on spaces in Jamaica endowed with social formations that serve the purposes of "reenactment," occasioning an orientation towards performing archival remains to disrupt linear temporality. Reenactment is a repetition of the past and a mode of political redress that brings the past into a dynamic relationship with the present, enacting a "cross-temporal" dialogue. In this manner, the archivism of gullies and sewers in Jamaica that represents the forced relocation of selected queer people emerges as a performative space where explicit and implicit narratives are constructed, contested, and continuously re-negotiated.

The relationship between archival repair or more so, the embodied response to the halting of black queer social life in Jamaica and Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist insistence, is understanding archivization not as a repository of static truths but as a co-constitutive process and a site of power dynamics, where what is deemed worthy of remembering and forgetting often reproduce an archivic violence.²

² Derrida engages with the concept of the archive as a site of power dynamics in his book *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* published in 1995. In this work, Derrida explores the tension between preservation and destruction, remembrance and forgetting, within the practice of archiving. He examines how archives are not neutral repositories of knowledge but are instead spaces where power, authority, and violence intersect, and where state-sanctioned narratives are often reproduced.

This way of thinking interacts with Astrid Erll's exploration of cultural memory as a living, fluid process of negotiation and conflict. Such an approach recognizes archival work not as neutral but as a performative act that captures and enacts the tensions therein.³ In the spirit of Erll, I argue for the criticality of centering the individual (in this case the researcher's body as a site of knowledge) whose memory is bound up with socio-cultural frameworks and modes of collective remembering.⁴ If re-enactment works in the way that Walter Benjamin describes translation (the translator and what is being translated for contemporary uses are crucial to bridging temporalities), engaging with historical materials in new ways challenges dominant forms of understanding to reveal the unusual suspects within the "original source," be it a text, an event, or an archive.

Trans(late)able departures: Critical Pivot Points

To reinforce a project of queer non-arrival, or the theatricalization of anti-queer archival traces, is on one hand an anarchivic reproduction of the "death drive." The archive-destroying agenda of the depoliticized queer culture in the Jamaican context, on the other hand, reveals an obsession, a melancholy at best, with the

³ Astrid Erll's book *Memory in Culture* (originally *Kultur der Erinnerung*). In this book, Erll explores cultural memory as a dynamic, ongoing process involving negotiation, conflict, and the active participation of various actors. She emphasizes that cultural memory is not static but rather constantly shaped and reshaped by socio-political contexts, practices, and power dynamics.

⁴ The body as a site of knowledge is not only a living archive of memory and experience but also an active participant in the negotiation of meaning, a locus where the performative and the material come together to produce knowledge. Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997), p. 2.

pleasures tied to the erotic allure of the penis/rectum pleasure politic. The queer researcher's commitment to deconstructing the archiviolithic force of the heterosexualization and masculinization of the modern Jamaican nation state, is to create a new "death drive" that temporarily hints at a false amnesia, a temporal departure from the state of exception.⁵ I call it a temporal departure to remain critical about projects deemed disruptive, anti-colonial and post-colonial.

Thus, the remediation of the archive is forever a work in progress, a kind of cruising utopia, where the departure from mnemonic traces of archival violence must exist within a state of pleasure and diss-pleasure. Only then can the pleasure of activism and Derrida's call for radical effacement sufficiently engage with the confluence of the political and the erotic. This is potentially what translatability implies—that a text contains within it the potential to take on new forms as it moves across temporalities and cultural contexts. From Agamben's concept of "bare life," we can argue that the original sodomy statute and its afterlife in Jamaican legal and cultural frameworks have translated queer subjects, specifically the gully queens, into a particular political and social stratification. These individuals whose humanities are easily downgraded to a rank of sub-humanity within practices of translation—understood as both a legal and cultural process—does not simply reduce them to exile, erasure and invisibility. To align the relegation of queer bodies to the gullies and sewers in Jamaica within the paradoxical contradictions inherent in the neo-nationalist project of concealing homosexuality, consideration must be given to these spaces not merely as sites of marginalization but as critical counter-sites that disrupt the ideological state apparatus.

⁵ M. Jacqui Alexander, "Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas," *Feminist Review*, no. 48 (1994): 5–23.

The presence of queer bodies in these spaces, then, transforms them into an active site of contestation—a refusal to disappear and an assertion of life amidst bare life conditions. It is within the visibility of the gully and sewer that queer Jamaicans articulate a counter-narrative, one that exposes the fault lines in the state's neo-nationalist project. This paradoxical reproduction of presence, in a context where the state seeks invisibility, highlights the instability and contradictions at the heart of Jamaica's sexual politics. In essence, these spaces do not merely reflect the relegation of queer bodies to the margins; they actively undermine and challenge the very framework that seeks to erase them—revealing the fraught and contested terrain upon which a narrow national identity is constructed in Jamaica.

sendynge, by persones hauynge no counnyng in o:derynge of the same: whiche acte was made to endure but onely to the parlyamente then nexte folowynge. And for as moche as it is evidently knowen, that the same acte and estatute aforesayde, is very good and necessarie for the common welthe of this realme: wherfore the kynge our soueraygne lord by the aduise and consent of his lordes spirituall and temporall, and the commons of this present parlyament assembled, and by the auctorite of the same, hath ordeyned, enacted, and establisshed, that the sayde acte and estatute, made in the v. yere of his moste noble reigne aforesayde, and euery thyng therein conteyned, shall from the feast of saynt Michell the archangel nexte comynge, contynue and be good and effectuell in euery poynte and article of the same for euer.

And furthermore be it enacted and establisshed, by the auctorite aforesayde, for the common welthe of the citie of Norwiche, and mayntenance, suppoztation, and vpholvyng of the houses, tenementes, and habitacions of the same, that no maner persone vsynge the crafte or misterie of dyenge of woostedes, stamyns, or sayes, or of anye of them, nother by them selves, or any seruant, factor, deputie, or any other by his commaundement or assignement, from the feast of Christmas nowte ensewynge, shall vse to callender any woostedes, stamens, or sayes, or any other commodities made of woostede yarne, durynge all suche tyme as the same persone shall vse the misterie or craft of dyenge aforesayde, vpon payne to forfait for euery piece so dyed and callenderde by colour, couyn, fraude, or contrarie to the true meanynge and entent of this present act. xli.s. and to be deuyded in thre egall parties, the one part therof to the kynge our soueraygne lord, and one other parte to the mayre for the tyme beinge, and the thirde parte to hym or them that wyll sue for the same by bylle, action of dette, playnt, information, or otherwise, in any of the kynges courtes: wherin none estone, delay, or protection shall be allowed.

An acte for the punysshment of the vice of buggerye. Cap. vi.

Wher as there is not yet sufficient & cōdigne punysshment, wherof the detestable & abominable vice of buggeri committed by mankynd or best. It may therfore please the kynges highnes, with the assent of his lordes spirituall & temporal, & the commons of this present parlyament assembled, that it may be enacted by auctorite of the same, that the same vice be from hensforth aduinged felony, and be therin to be vsed ageynste the offenders as the comon lawe. And that the offenders shal suffre suche penalties of their goodes, cattals, dettes, and heredytamentes, as felons benne accustomed to do.

Section 4

Black Social Dance: ChicagoLand Moves

February 28-March 1, 2025

Northwestern University, Chicago IL

convened by Webster B. McDonald





Installation co-directed by Wills Glasspiegel and Brandon K. Calhoun for Art on the Mart in Chicago, 2021

Never Not Social

Wills Glasspiegel

Wills Glasspiegel is an award-winning filmmaker, public artist, writer, scholar, and community organizer. In 2023, he co-directed *Skywalkers*, a large-scale, permanent installation film for O'Hare International Airport. In 2024, Wills completed a PhD in African American Studies and American Studies at Yale University, with a dissertation titled "Geometry of a Ghost: Chicago Footwork and the Sound System Continuum."

Of several minds dancing
Me, myself, and I and I
Alone but not alone
Hearing voices
Feet become heads and
Heads become tails
Several sides to this story
Several stories to that side
Double takes, body doubles, and facets
Minds of their own making
I followed my guts to
Many places at once
Four-eyed déjà vu with
Footwork tracks by RP Boo¹
Record players with wrenches
Ghosts inside machines
Renegade dreams
More than what it seems

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hKFIGJHXU-0>
Bang'n on King Drive, 2016, short film by author and
RP Boo at the Bud Billiken Parade with K-Phi-9.



Chicago Black Social Culture Map: The Impact of Social Dance and Culture.

Meida McNeal

Meida McNeal is Artistic and Managing Director of Honey Pot Performance. She received her PhD in Performance Studies from Northwestern University and her MFA in Choreography & Dance History from Ohio State University. Meida worked with the Chicago Park District as Arts & Culture Manager supporting community arts partnerships, youth arts, cultural stewardship, and civic engagement initiatives.

Background

The Chicago Black Social Culture Map (CBSCM), led by Honey Pot Performance (HPP), is a public humanities platform and community archive for the preservation of Chicago's Black social cultural lineage—past, present, and future. Annually, the CBSCM presents a series of programs, archiving days, and exhibitions, which engage local in-person audiences and partners, as well as an international community.

The CBSCM's ongoing repository building and programming initiative addresses the problem—endemic to communities of color and other historically marginalized populations—of Black Chicagoans being left out of official, mainstream, or most resourced historical records. Through the CBSCM, HPP and its partners create an opportunity for Black Chicagoans to actively insert their own histories into the official canon. Furthermore, the CBSCM's public platform creates a model for the ongoing documentation and accessibility of Chicago's Afro-diasporic performance traditions. We create transformative experiences that aim to challenge dominant narratives, uplift the marginalized voices of our own community, and foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of Black social culture.

In its totality, from public programs and performances to the archive itself, the CBSCM represents the first attempt to compile and construct a public and accessible archive for the exploration of Black social culture in Chicago. The CBSCM highlights how the active insertion of this particular history into the public record is timely and pressing because 1) as an oral history, it is constantly in danger of being lost to time; and 2) many of the themes—how people deal with public safety in a charged racial climate, issues of sexuality, etc —surrounding Black social clubs remain highly relevant today.

The CBSCM's programs and archiving activities represent an ongoing interactive, collaborative exploration of the positive spaces that Black people made for themselves through the cultivation and caretaking of social life in clubs, roller rinks, record stores, cultural centers, parks, and other third spaces.

The quotes and images below represent a wide sampling of the CBSCM's public programs related to dance, movement, and social culture architecture, community building, and cultural preservation.



On the Intersection of Everyday and Spiritual Elements of Black Social Dance and Culture

I can't really put together what emotion that I personally felt when I saw somebody else skate. All I could think about is what I felt entering the building. It wasn't anybody else that really made me want to do it. What I saw was something that I was missing in life, which is like, I saw a sense of community. I saw hard work. I saw determination. I saw fun. I saw acceptance. I saw social acceptance. I saw validation. I saw spirits, I saw energies and I saw where those energies were coming from and how they were just being whirled around in a circle and how each energy was being passed off from person to person that was being infiltrated through the music.¹

¹ Josh "Batsmoke" Smith, JB Skater. CBSCM 5.20.23a: How We Roll Chicago Roller Skating Culture Panel (part 1).



On Defining 'Jacking' as a Signature Move of Chicago House Dance Vocabulary

I know Chicago is like we have a lot of communal types of dances, right? So I feel like jacking is a vibe. It's a groove. You know what I'm saying? It's a way of people to figure out what the vibe is [of] what the music is doing. So I think it has that communal thing that at least for me growing up in the Chicago area, I've always been a part [of]. Like I said, I keep going back to this African community, the sense of community. We will always come and dance together. There will always be a dance that everybody did together. So whatever it was, you know what I'm saying? So I feel like the Jack...that little groove is something. It's not too hard. It's not too simple. Like there's so many ways you can, you know, take your Jack however you want it, but it was simple enough where you can have this thing that we all are vibing to and get this, because we all know that these dance forms can be higher than just in the club—it can be taken to another level when it's done together.²

² Amansu Eason, Dancer. CBSCM 7.22.23: Changing Vocabulary of House Dance Panel.

Oral history is a critical archival mechanism in CBSCM. One of the benefits of the initiative is that you get to hear directly from practitioners who are trained in, born into, and are themselves innovators of these forms. You hear them articulate and define these traditions in their own words, which creates one of the most powerful effects of oral history. You're listening to people share their histories of knowledge and practice—rooted in the worlds they come from. One of the strengths of articulating and discussing Black social dance is the emphasis on the imperative of doing. The social would not exist without the doing, the practice, and the body.

Archiving oral histories is a means of tracking community impact, understanding how relationships are formed, how they are sustained, and how they give birth to new ones. It also allows us to understand how individuals perceive sociality and relationality, and ultimately—how they assess what works and what doesn't. As these Black social forms evolve, people move in and out of them. New participants arrive while others depart or create their own spaces. Younger folks may decide to build something new. There is, therefore, a constant evolution within the community itself.

Community is not monolithic. Take Chicago house culture, for example. Within it, you already see a large collective of people who understand house music's significance to the city. They may have emerged from the intensity of urban life, particularly from the South and West Sides, grounded in Black and queer culture. But the form is always shifting, always in motion. New communities are born from it and occasionally interact with one another.

More to the point, if we don't appreciate or share our knowledge with the younger generation, the form risks dying—or losing its connection to the "keepers of the flame" tradition.



On Praise Mother, Social Dance, + Majorette/J-Sette Cultures

Aaliyah Christina

Born in Ruston, Louisiana and raised across Louisiana, Maryland, and Texas, Aaliyah Christina creates and supports performance work as an administrator, curator, movement artist, and writer. She makes dances and writes poetic stories about relationship/power dynamics, mental health, and Blackness as a resident on the Southside of Chicago.

She created PRAISE MOTHER SQUAD to highlight the multifaceted possibilities of Black majorette dance (aka j-sette) and platform stories about mental health, reproductive rights, and various family dynamics.

In a lot of ways, the spectacle is sacred, especially in the context of Black social dance and its role in Praise Mother. Praise Mother is an investigation into the expansiveness of majorette dance, social dance, and Afro-diasporic improvisation. The project highlights the dancers' relationship with each other, their matriarchs, and Spirit. It champions stories of camaraderie, socio-political commentary, and freedom to move our bodies. Black majorette has evolved from a semi-formal performance practice accompanying Historically Black Colleges & Universities' marching bands into a culture of Blk femme and queer expression of sensuality, synchronization, athleticism, polyrhythmic fluidity, and sharp precision. Not only do we see j-setting on the football field or stadium stands, but we also see it on playgrounds, gay nightclubs, gymnasiums, and carpeted living rooms.

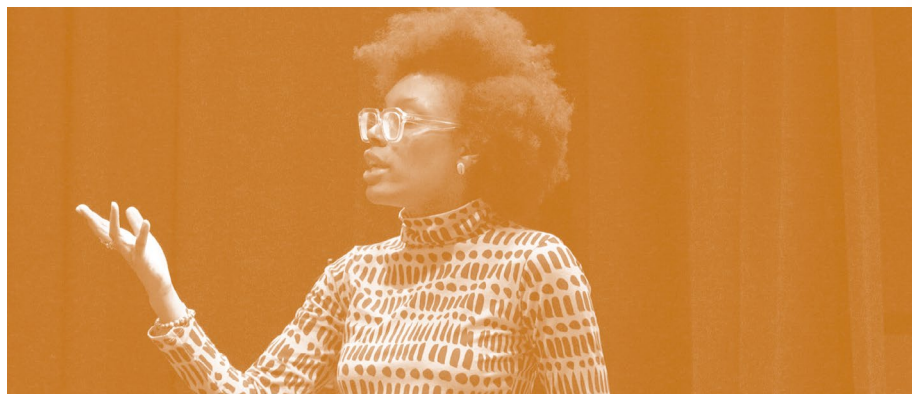
J-setting is a social dance. It emphasizes the importance of group play and community building. Its growth outside of the formality and respectability of the Blk university has allowed adolescents to open its form towards a more athletic and acrobatic practice that has also expanded the competitive nature derived from the colloquial "fifth quarter" of HBCU games. On the flip side, gay men and transfeminine dancers, who have long been excluded from HBCU squads outside of coaching and choreographing, have created their own squads to compete and show out in ballroom clubs & events.

Regional differences of majorette/j-sette create new ways of forming and performing choreography. Chicago majorette, in particular, incorporates juke and Chicago footwork into the counts. Our Chicago counts allow more opportunities for breaking out of synchronization whether that's through improvisation or coordinated duets and solos away from the main group/squad. Improvisation occurs more in club or playground settings where dancers decide to spontaneously battle each other, trading tricks and flare.

My creative research continues through the project of Praise Mother and moving with j-sette in different settings. I wonder about the differences between formal, academic studio practice, j-sette in recreational clubs and competitions, and how the form shows up in the queer underground ballroom scene. I understand that we find aesthetic differs in each setting; that the skill set for dancing remains at a high level in each context, but the specific skill sets differ. Social motivation for dancing absolutely shifts from space to space, highlighting different cultural values, and certain forms of politicking are always present even when they aren't explicitly stated. J-sette reminds us of our concerns with sexuality and sexualization, an adultification bias that might restrict our ability to move freely, and the terms of respectability that surround Blk femme presence in the world.

If Black social dance is a mode of liberation, the freedom to express individuality within the spectacle of j-sette deserves our respect and our collective breath.





The Reveal as Black Social Dance: Burlesque, Drag, and the Politics of Embodiment

Jen “Po’ Chop” Freeman

Chicago-based burlesque artist Jennifer Freeman, also known as Po’Chop, uses elements of dance, storytelling, and striptease to create performances and inspire students and collaborators across the country. Po’Chop is the creator and author of the blogzine, *The Brown Pages* and has performed at the Brooklyn Museum in *Brown Girls Burlesque’s Bodyspeak*, at the Harris Theater for Music and Dance for *TedxChicago 2022*, as well as headlined shows in New Orleans, Minneapolis, Denver, St. Louis and New York.

In the context of Black social dance, I foreground the tease and reveal as a kind of titillation, withholding, and autonomy. The tease is an orientation of control and bodily autonomy, creating a relationship between the performer as the shaper of experience and the witnesses as receivers of sensations of eroticism, but in a way that foregrounds the shaper's practice of distilling emotions in an accumulative manner.

Within this space, the reveal itself becomes a social dance—demanding attention, using the erotic not merely as spectacle but as radical presence. Here, eroticism is not a passive observation but an invitation to bring our full awareness into the room, where personal transformation becomes possible, even necessary. We find ourselves in slow-moving performances, deliberate and intentional. It is an act that asserts agency, the profound ability to say "no," articulating boundaries even within the vulnerability of performance.

The tease is relational—it is a call and response, an ongoing negotiation of sociality between self and audience. It asks continuously: What kind of relationship is being summoned here? What sensations, what futures, are being conjured through this careful choreography of disclosure and concealment? The tease becomes a personal practice, a careful labor, a negotiation of how much to give and how much to hold back. Perhaps it is indeed a form of protection, a deliberate, purposeful withholding that guards the integrity and autonomy of the dancer.

In this interplay of tease and reveal, we confront a fundamental question: can sociality itself be an intentional endeavor, one shaped not only by shared experiences but by strategic reticence and intentional generosity? This dance calls us into an aesthetic imperative, suggesting we each have a role to play. Our job, then, might be precisely this—to actively participate, to bear witness, to affirm the boundaries and generosity that shape our shared erotic, spiritual, and communal spaces. The tease becomes both a provocation and a shelter, embodying the delicate balance between intimacy and autonomy.

House of the Lorde

House of the Lorde is a multi-functional, 800-square-foot studio nestled within Mana Contemporary, an artist complex located in the vibrant Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago. Rooted deeply in Black feminist praxis, our space hosts a rich tapestry of offerings, including a monthly reading group, restorative meditations, artist fellowships, and transformative classes in burlesque and drag.



House of the Lorde, Chicago, IL

House of the Lorde serves as a spiritual sanctuary steeped in Black feminist practice. We believe our erotic essence is a profound wellspring of hidden knowledge. We believe that presenting our fullest selves liberates everyone in our presence. We cherish the joys of laughter, luxurious rest, and the nurturing of our pleasures. We are committed to studying and honoring the sacred works of Black feminist poets, thinkers, and artists. Our erotic sensibilities guide us towards celebrating our authentic selves and embracing our differences. Through our imagination, we create new worlds capable of holding our freedom. Above all, we trust that everything we need already resides within us.

We use Black feminism as a lens to explore how burlesque and drag serve as expressions of Black social dance. Dance is our method of organizing life and redefining time; it is communal, improvisational, and inherently resistant. Emerging organically from spaces such as parties, clubs, alleyways, street corners, cabarets, and church services, social dance embodies relationality, spontaneity, and collective imagination. For us, it is a form of gathering, a shared practice to envision and experience life beyond the confines of systems designed to restrict blackness and Black erotic expression.



Not Without Right: The Mark of Black Social Dance

Dr. Ayo Walker

Dr. Ayo Walker is an Assistant Professor of Critical Dance Studies at Columbia College Chicago and the Hip Hop Pedagogy Dance instructor at Rennie Harris University. As an anti-racist educator utilizing culturally relevant and critical dance pedagogies, her praxis is committed to substantiating the techniques, vernaculars, and genealogies, and embodiment of historically marginalized and othered dance aesthetics in higher education dance spaces.

Not Without Right – after the motto of William Shakespeare’s family – means that something is justified or has a legitimate claim to be done, essentially implying that there is a valid reason or basis for an action or position. In the instance of Black Social Dance marked and othered as informal, improvisational, and vernacular, specifically done so to locate it inferiorly to Western Eurocentric codified dance forms, I use not without right to affirm Black Social Dance’s place in the same canon of codified dance forms based on its culturally relevant codification. I also use it to think through its misappropriation and exploitation evidenced in relation to these same Western Eurocentric codified dance forms, which certainly affirms its place in this canon. Therefore, not without right to being taken seriously in study, practice, and performance suitable for the concert stage. Most importantly not without right to its own authorization because in the Africanist and Black dance aesthetics, improvisation is choreography and vernacular is culturally relevant codification, and informality is decolonial.

Dr. Halifu Osumare discusses the creative genius of Harris’s “informality of street dance ... that can challenge the status quo of modern, ballet, and modern jazz dance as the only legitimate concert forms capable of compelling choreographic content” (pp261-262). My reading of informality immediately struck a nerve; what makes street dance “unofficial” and who gets to decide? Then I read, “Harris explicates: ‘Urban dance is not formal. It’s an experience. It’s social. That’s what allows it to denounce what tends to control’” (pp261-262). I read that last line repeatedly, until it read, the informality of street dance doesn’t make it unofficial, it makes it absent of Eurocentric and ethnocentric structuralism.

It must be noted that Eurocentrism is the belief that European or Western culture is superior to others and that it is the center of the world. It can be a worldview, mindset, or way of thinking. And ethnocentrism means to apply one's own culture or ethnicity as a frame of reference to judge other cultures, practices, behaviors, beliefs, and people, instead of using the standards of the particular culture involved. Dr. Osumare goes on to say, "Indeed, Harris has taken the experience of street dance, in all its unceremonious, improvisational, at-the-moment creation, and transformed it into poignant choreography that is on the cutting edge of today's dance and theater worlds" (p262). Which I read as, this brother changed the joke and slipped the yoke, denouncing the reading of informality as unofficial "through his adept use of hip-hop elements and contemporary theatrical devices" and breaking free from the prescriptive staging of concert dance (p262). Harris states, "Because it's on the stage, people think community does not exist. My dancers will change my choreography [to fit their needs at the moment], sometimes to the point that I don't even recognize it. We have actually had b-boys come up on stage from the audience and represent" (p265). Harris's technique is authorized by both the academic and concert dance spaces as "structured improvisation" a process where a dancer or group of dancers create a dance composition that includes a structured framework, such as a specific theme, musical piece, or set of movement phrases, but allows for spontaneous and improvisational movement within that structure. Still, these spaces insist on locating this way of working at the periphery of the western dance discipline as vernacular, meaning dances that are social and improvisational, developed naturally and reflecting the culture of the community that created them.

Osumare asserts, "Harris shatters the high art (read ballet and modern dance) and low art (read popular street dance) paradigm in a definitive style that challenges our notions of modernism in dance" (p261). Ultimately, rendering the informal mark of Black social dances as not without right to the same acclaim to identifiable art as all Western Eurocentric dance forms. "Johnathan Jackson's appraisal of the place of improvisation in the African American dance repertoire: '...is that in African-American vernacular dancing improvisation is choreography'" (p266). Since choreography signifies structure in the reading of formal dance, and codification is naming and therefore claiming and read as authorization, then "Harris's branch of hip hop dance that he has dubbed the 'ballet of hip-hop dance' because of its highly skilled, exhibitionist style," deauthorizes the mark of Black vernacular dances as unofficial (p264). Harris says, "hip hop proper is party dances and from the start hip hop dance was codified through the naming of these party dances based on what they represented and what they were presenting" (Harris, 2024). As Osumare's chapter further explores, "Harris is well aware not only of improvisation as choreography but also of the African dance continuum from which it comes" (p267). How continuums produce and persist anew is inextricably linked to ritualistic systems and capitalistic systems. And how the popularization of their blending breeds the American dance culture.

Harris, Rennie. "Hip Hop Dance" CSU Summer Arts Lecture, 2024.

Osumare, Halifu. "The Dance Archaeology of Rennie Harris: Hip Hop or Postmodern?" in *Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader* edited by Julie Malnig (2009), 261-282.

Social dances that emerge from Black communities and are passed down informally in social settings acting as a ritualistic system are based on tradition, community, and meaning. While Western social dances practiced and performed in institutional settings (dance studios and schools) act as a capitalistic system, based on economic gains. This distinction is important for the understanding of authorization and legitimation of certain social dances and not others. Social dances emerging from Eurocentric communities differ from social dances emerging from Black communities based on classism versus cultural identity expression. However, musical evolution, specifically ragtime, bebop, and rock n roll, influenced popular culture trends that blurred community distinctions initially governing social dances. Thus, a transcendence of classicist boundaries resulted in a shared vernacular that subsequently located social dance in other dichotomies, subcultural vs mainstream, contemporary vs commercial, and academic vs professional.

Additionally, the contexts in which these social dances are being studied become yet another contentious matter in the dance discipline. Because what develops in these public domains contributes to the hybridization of formal and informal social dances that do not share the same intentions for public consumption. Thus, how the hybridity of contemporary social dance materializes on the concert stage and becomes a commodifiable entity is yet another bait and switch tool in the system of oppression. While both Black and Western social dance forms exist on a continuum from ritualistic cultural expression to capitalistic mainstream phenomenon, their congealed theatricalized styles should receive equitable credit as independent "identifiable art," respectively contributing to the Americanization of dance.





Combinations and Foundations: A Genealogy of Footwork

Jamal 'Litebulb' Oliver

Jamal "Litebulb" Oliver is a renowned artist, savant, and cultural bearer of the Chicago Footwork dance style. As a dancer, musician, producer, choreographer, curator, educator, public speaker, and community leader, Litebulb continues to push the genre's boundaries, expanding and amplifying the artistic forms within footwork culture and empowering Chicago Footwork dancers to be producers and organizers of the form.

When you think about footwork, it's not just about the dancing—it's about patterns, memory, and how movement gets passed on. In the early days, it wasn't about doing solos. You didn't just go out there and freestyle. Everything was done in combinations. That's what it was about—putting different moves together to build something. Moves like the Earth Jerks, the Sailboat, Tom and Jerry, and the Random Man weren't meant to stand alone. They were made for the purpose of creating routines and full statements through movement.

It was a kind of system.

Back then, dance crews were everything. You had to be in a group. That was the structure. These groups were influenced by hip hop and had their own style—Chicago hip hop, essentially. From within these groups, footworkers often emerged. They didn't always start at the front. They came from the back—sometimes in solos, and sometimes as part of a set. But solo dancing wasn't encouraged in those early spaces. It had to be organized in a collective fashion.

Then came Anthony Brown. After being kicked out of a crew, he created a new space called the Battleplace as a way to go up against the groups that rejected him. Instead of joining another crew, he found people in his neighborhood who were interested in building something new. He always said that the most foundational move he made was called the "EarthJump." But he never claimed it as his alone. He would say, "It wasn't just me that made it up." When we asked who helped, he'd name people like Cornell and others—but we never knew exactly who they were. It was like he was protecting something, or someone, or maybe just the spirit of collaboration.

Later in life, I made it a mission to find these people. I told him, "Give me their names—I'll find them for you." And I did. Some of them lived right around the corner. These were folks still embedded in the culture, still carrying the code in how they moved and how they taught. Think about being in Chicago at that time: everybody was dancing in sync—doing the same routines, skating across the floor. Then someone walks in and arranges it all together in a new way. That was what made the form shift, it prompted people to stop and watch. Dancers like Edna were out-dancing everybody because no one else moved like that. It wasn't just boys either. There were girls in the dungeon—just as raw and as sharp.

I started writing down what I call a "dance history," in an attempt to document how Chicago footwork emerged. In the early 1980s, it wasn't called footwork. It existed before the producers put Chicago's flash-forward music together—before the ghetto house sound and beat culture took over. People assume footwork came from house music, but it grew alongside beat culture. That sound was faster, more intense. We weren't at house parties—we were at beat parties. It sounded like house, but it pushed the dancers differently.

On the West Side, crews like The Touchables were foundational. Dancers like Elvis, Bo, Chapman, Sticks, and V-Dell created early moves like the Holy Ghost and the Shuffle. These were the basics. They created animations—movements that were like pulling your heart out, kicking, popping, blocking. These moves eventually got folded into what became the Ghost. These were the terms people used. The Running Man was just called Ice Skates back then. That was West Side language.

These moves eventually fed into more mainstream hip hop choreography—things like the Tom and Jerry, the Running Man, the Butterfly. Meanwhile, Chicago also had its own iconic moves—like the Percolator, popularized by Mike Manson. Dancers took these elements and turned them into routines, whether for performances or battles. That was how local dance culture worked—through groups.

By the late 1980s, the group Footwork was formed by dancers like Calvin Goose and Michael. They were part of House and Attics, one of the most legendary dance crews—from the West Side to the South Side. Groups like Main Attraction and TMVY were also around before Footwork became defined by competition.

These groups laid the groundwork.

One of the most important crews from the South Side was led by Riding Sloan. They took influence from West Side dancers and added step-based movements—like what you’d see in Black fraternities. This blend of step and animation created a South Side style that spread across the inner city and into the suburbs.

Anthony Brown kept pushing. He helped shape what we now recognize as foundational Footwork. Moves like the Earth Dirt, and his version of the Ghost, weren’t just routines—they became blueprints. Dancers like Riberia carried the form. Eventually, Brown left the battle scene and began teaching younger dancers in his neighborhood. It wasn’t a crew at first. His training ground was a basement in a three-story apartment building in Auburn Gresham. That basement became known as “the dungeon.” But people started writing their names on the plug wall, and the identity stuck. The Dungeon Boys were born from that space.

Brown didn't work alone. He built with Jerry, Aaron, Cornell, Denise, and others. From the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, they took all those inherited moves and began combining them. That's how footwork as we know it today was shaped—through combinations. That's also when battle crews began to form. Groups like Wolf Pack and The Firm emerged from this new phase. The Firm, from the South Suburbs, included dancers like BT, Doe Boy, and Marlin. Unlike earlier groups, these crews focused more on competition than on choreographed routines. They moved away from fraternity-style formations and toward freestyle expression.

There was even a period when many of the original footworkers stepped back, and the scene got quiet. But that silence gave birth to a new generation. Crews like Terror Squad, The Creation, and others rose up. The culture didn't die—it migrated, adapted, and kept going.

To keep that lineage alive, I started teaching. I built an online series to show people how to footwork—from home, in their cars, wherever. It's like driving—you can learn as you go. And now, I want to keep sharing.

I want to teach folks how to do the Ghost. It's not complicated, it's not flashy—but it carries the most history. And that means everything.





Rehearsing Togetherness: Black Social Dance as Analytic

Danielle Roper

Danielle Roper is Assistant Professor in the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures at the University of Chicago. She holds a Ph.D in Spanish and Portuguese and an MA in Performance Studies from New York University. Her work on racial and queer performance, feminist activism, and racial formation in contemporary Latin America and the Caribbean has appeared in *GLQ*, *Latin American Research Review*, and *Small Axe*.

Black social dance constitutes a repertoire of Black connectivity. It is a set of embodied practices wherein people rehearse black sociality. Black social dance is both performance and a mode of being that stages the communal, demarcates belonging, and sets in motion the relations of power that organize our communities. In my view, Black social dance operates not only as cultural practice but as analytic: it offers a method for thinking about the entanglements of theory and practice, embodiment and knowledge, collectivity and imagination.

While it is rarely ever the central object of my own research on black performance, Black social dance sporadically appears in my teaching. It is not always a focus, but certainly is a presence. As someone who teaches Afro-Latin and Afro-Caribbean performance, Black social dance is crucial for helping students learn about the politics of race, gender, and sexuality in the region. In my classroom, students encounter the politics of rumba, black folkloric traditions, and their role in Black political economy. Thus, Black social dance functions as a pedagogical method: a way of encountering and transmitting knowledge about race that is not solely textual but somatic, rhythmic, and relational.

My participation in the Slippage Lab's symposium allowed me to garner an understanding of how Thomas F. DeFrantz theorizes Black social dance as a mode of temporality—a way of dancing out of structural time. One of the questions that emerged was: How does it generate alternative signatures of being and knowing that exist as an insistence on freedom but not a direct response to nonfreedom? That is, how might Black dance create a temporal departure that exists outside the logics of resistance, outside the technologies that seek to constrain Black freedom?

My recent reading of Maya Berry's *Defending Rumba in Havana: The Sacred and the Black Corporeal Undercommons* (2025) offers a provocative framework for such thinking. In that work, Berry proposes that Black life as articulated through rumba in Cuba does not necessarily conform to familiar narratives of resistance. Rather than positioning Black movement as oppositional by default, Berry reads rumba as a form of corporeal world-making—one in which dance enacts modes of collectivity, desire, and sacredness without needing to be intelligible as protest and radical black thought.

I am drawn to this idea because it makes space for a conceptualization and re-orientation of Black social dance that is not burdened with the responsibility to disrupt or overturn normative structures. What if the value of the practice lies precisely in its refusal to perform resistance? What if its force comes from the fact that it rehearses alternate imaginaries—ways of being, gathering, and feeling that are not necessarily directed toward confrontation, but toward Black survival itself? This reading allows Black social dance to foreground desire, intimacy, and mutuality, without being tethered to the demand to produce recognizable outcomes or futures.

In this sense, Black social dance may be less about resistance and more about the presence forged when black people come together to rehearse and prepare for something else. It may be a rehearsal of togetherness in a specific moment in time—complete in its immediacy, unencumbered by the need to signify models of progress. It asks us to let the moment formed through gathering be sufficient. Perhaps the analytic power of Black social dance lies in its ability to gather people into relation, into movement, without centering structures that seek to undermine or erase their subjectivity.

This is not to suggest that Black social dance does not enact or undertake any intellectual labor. On the contrary, the knowledge generated through the body—theory in motion, so to speak—exists alongside written, logocentric traditions. These are not mutually exclusive epistemologies. Rather, they coexist. The performative and the textual enter different registers of thought, each illuminating the other. Black social dance theorizes a relationship to time in an immediate sense; to write about this immediacy is a commitment to hold on to what remains after the gathering comes to a pause. Therefore, the written text is an extension of black social dance. Each offers a unique way of engaging with the density of Black life.

There is no imperative to reconcile these modalities, no pressure to prioritize one over the other. They do different things, speak to different rhythms, and move in different directions. Together, they expand what it means to know, to study, and to be in relation to Black social dance.



Talking Moves: Black Social Dance as Healing, Communication, and Collective Future

Michael "Mike D Chicago" Davis

Michael Davis, better known as Mike D Chicago, raised on the southside of Chicago, is a man of many talents. He can sing, dance, rap, instruct, mentor, produce, create and choreograph. He thrives in being able to use all of his gifts at once and at the same time help and encourage someone along the way.

Black Social Dance

Black social dance is how I speak—how I connect, how I live. It's not just about movement, nor solely about performance for the sake of entertainment. It's communication rooted in culture, shaped by space, and passed between generations. I define Black social dance as a way of talking to each other without using words. It's how we engage in our communities and with our histories, often without needing to explain ourselves.

I've seen how this form allows people to connect across time and experience. When I'm in a room full of dancers, I might be 41, but I'm sharing movement with six-year-olds and seventy-five-year-olds. That's intergenerational dialogue in motion. The dance doesn't just reflect culture—it carries it. It's a space where knowledge gets exchanged across bodies, often faster and deeper than spoken language allows.

Action as Language

There's a reason why people say, "actions speak louder than words." That's real. In Black social dance, movement is more than just aesthetic—it's knowledge making. It holds knowledge. You can say something with your mouth, and it might achieve intelligibility. But if you do it with your body, more feelings and sensations are being communicated. They understand it in their bones.

When I teach or share movement, I see how gestures, rhythms, and steps turn into a full conversation. When people start exchanging dance—really experiencing it, not just copying steps but feeling each other out—they're participating in something powerful. And what's key is that this communication doesn't require talking. It relies on presence. On being attuned. That's what makes it different from other forms of learning or interaction. It doesn't ask for permission—it invites participation.

A Practice of Healing

What I offer does not arrive in the context of a “class.” I call it an experience. I want people to know that when they come into my space, they’re not just learning footwork. They’re stepping into something that can help them make greater sense of life. Dance might arrive as a form of healing. In my “Community Works” sessions, people use dance to unplug—to turn down the volume of everyday life, allowing them to be fully present.

Some folks show up with real weight on their shoulders: work, family, bills, anxiety, grief. And some of them haven’t danced in years. Others never had the chance. But when they move, something else emerges. The room becomes a space of release. The old footwork shoes is back on, compelling the return of joy. Self-confidence follows.

One of the tools I use is call and response. I’ll start with the call, “Tell your neighbor you got it today,” and that allows people to self-affirm while affirming the humanity of each other. Call and response in this context does the work of building each other up, which doesn’t happen often in more traditional dance settings. In those settings, one might learn steps and leave without interacting with anyone. In my experience-based approach, the dance is relational. It’s not just about learning—it’s about being, belonging, and co-existing.

Refilling the Cup: Self-Care as Praxis

I teach others to care for themselves, but that means I’ve had to learn how to care for myself simultaneously. Being a facilitator doesn’t mean I’m invincible. I experience anxiety. I feel pressure. I carry people’s energy with me after every session. So I’ve had to figure out how to pour into myself before I can pour into others.

One way I do that is by remaining a lifelong student. I seek out people who are more experienced—OGs in the dance, elders in the community. I ask questions. I learn. That helps me refill my cup. And I live by this principle: What's in the cup is for me; the overflow is for everybody else. I take time for peace—driving in silence, resting, exercising—so I can keep showing up in the right way. This, too, is a form of Black social dance practice. It's not just about what happens in the studio or on the dance floor. It's about sustaining yourself so the movement can live on through you.

Race, Legacy, and Moving Toward Togetherness

There is no thinking about Black social dance without a relationship to race. That's just the truth. The movement I do, Chicago footwork, has a history. It has a lineage. And it comes from Black communities, from Black experience, from Black genius. As an educator, it's my job to name that and honor it. That's part of the teaching. That's part of the accountability.

But here's the other side: while it's important to honor the cultural roots, it's also important to create spaces that are welcoming. I've been in rooms with people of all ethnicities—Black, white, Latinx, Asian—and I see how the dance brings us together. I don't want to gatekeep movement. I want people to experience it fully, to respect it, and to grow from it.

The goal for me is love. The goal is togetherness. We are trying to create the conditions for us to live on this planet together, a way to move with and against violent histories—Black social dance can show us how to do that. We’ve had separation in the past—real separation, violent separation. But in the present, we’re sharing spaces in ways that ask: how do we use the dance to find that middle ground? I don’t think that the events I create in Black social dance spaces are about figuring out everyone else’s intention. On the contrary, my job is to show up in the space with the right intention, with specific offerings of knowledge, and then allow the receivers to decide their mode of relation to the work.

Black Social Dance as a Pathway Forward

What I’m leaning into is this: Black social dance is not just about bodies moving. It’s about the transformation of lives. It’s about holding space for grief and joy, past and future, pain and celebration. It’s a technology of care, a form of resistance, and a practice of radical togetherness. Whether I’m working with a group of elders or a group of kids, what I see is the same: dance reminds people of who they are. It gives them permission to show up. To feel good again. To connect. That’s what it’s all about. That’s why I do it every day. Because in a world that tries to divide and exhaust us, Black social dance helps us remember that we’re still here. We’re still moving. We’re still healing. And we’re doing it together.





Afro-Kinetic Memory Frequencies: Thinking Black Social Dance from the Inside

E. Moncell Durden

E. Moncell Durden is a performer, dance educator, choreographer, documentarian, embodied historian, and author. Moncell specializes in pedagogical practices that prove cultural and historical context in what he calls the morphology of Afro-kinetic memory. His documentary *Everything Remains Raw: A Historical Perspective of Hip Hop Dance*, is available on his website moncelldurden.com.

A negotiation.

A resonance.

A return.

The body is already telling us something. How do we figure out what it is telling us? The body has mitochondrial DNA, a kind of pre-acceleration, and Bakongo cosmogramic logic. What are we allowed to forget? What happens if we forget? We are, after all, discovering our autobiographical selves through dance. The CELL—Rennie Harris, Baba Chuck—they knew. They studied dance and people. They studied how to ask the core questions.

The work is about reflexivity as a developmental space of growth—the social as a reflexive space.

Afro-Kinetic memory is an aesthetic articulation of beats (familiar and unfamiliar), of body in motion, and movement in time and space. There are Polyrhythms—aargh! — complex rhythms. It's a frequency. It's about the origin story being remembered in the flesh. Knowing your stuff, knowing their stuff. William "Bubbles" Holloway, Shim Sham, Trankie Do, Hully Gully, LA Hustle, Electric Slide, Detroit Bus Stop, Texas ELVIRA. These are not just steps. These are cells. Frequencies. Lineages. You can't drop culture—the thing moves across time and space somehow. Through the body. Through the steps. With aesthetic quality.

My work theorizes within a morphology of Afro-Kinetic memory-frequency, made possible through an emphasis on origin stories as a way of making critical connections across the field. This morphology as a technique provides a skeletal organization of thoughts—all geared towards resisting social dancing as a fad. Thinking about social dance this way operates in and out of structure as an organizing principle. Disavowing what feels like a mesmerizing charge of energy calls attention to the social connectivity already present in dance. For example, the Drop Bounce, the East Coast Stomp, the Double Bounce Pull Back, when routed through Afro-Kinetic memory, move us to arrive at re-connection. The bouncing found inside the movement produces rev up steps, yes, and most importantly, reveals how knowledge is situated inside dance.

Dancing is locked in a relational bind. It moves with pop culture, as in the “Angry Black Girl,” and the Nae-Nae. Gestural practices are shaped by a cultural response that then becomes a “structured” dance form. Thus, the emergence of dance reveals a trajectory of some kind. Take the “Hit Dem Folx” and the Nae Nae. They operate under a kind of linguistic play—a gathering of social practices that emerge in the community and contribute to an economy of socio-linguistic texts.

What we’re talking about is an awareness of frequency, our frequency, emerging from origin stories, reflection, intention, and construction.

The dances are all connected. Jazz and House. Hip-hop dances are put into House. The Hustle is foundational for some of the steps. When people are going from one place to another, the geography of freedom becomes a geography of people feeling free to move.

We're looking for a place of transformation to transport us to temporary liberation. With movement comes change. But also—does it have to? Virtuosity can evacuate the space of the social. What happens then? The expert changes the thing. And then, when you listen for the different layers of sound or motion, the dance changes. And still, we're asking: how do we do the thing? How do we remember how to do the thing?

Dance is autobiographical.

It's a negotiation.

Expression is a way to share the inner core.

*Spirit is greater than the experience of
time on earth.*

*Something becomes collective through
world-making.*

Something is made possible through dancing.

*Place becomes crucial to how we understand
that movement.*

We must be respectful of what came before. And we need to look from inside the thing in order to understand it better. We want to note the essence of change and innovation in dance that allows for transformation among people. As Don Campbell said "Do me but be you." We want to explore the choreographic but not become choreocentric. Don offers an irreducible social principle. The spirit of the place brings forward the dance. Dancing, if it's coming from within you and you recognize it, then it's yours.

The Jit is Detroit.

*The jitters are not from Detroit or Black,
but part of the community.*

The dance can belong to the place in its time.

I travel to Europe to teach often. Now I'm navigating a matrix. I've lived twenty-three years of being an educator. Teaching so much and so many places, because dance is important almost everywhere. The location always offers a way to think about how dance emerges. What can dance do? Dance teaches us how to be in relation.

It's an invitation.

A negotiation.

A resonance.

A return.



Mellon Foundation Supports SLIPPAGE Laboratory at Northwestern University Race, Black Dance and the Embodied Geographies of Freedom

2023-2025

This research output is a part of the Mellon Foundation-funded project **Race, Black Dance, and Embodied Geographies of Freedom**, a humanities-driven initiative that explored how we gather histories of social dancing as living documents of practice embedded within ever-emergent Black Life. The initial three-year project took on manifestations of social dance in six cities as a way to characterize and understand Black Thought through the practices of people engaged in embodied arts. The question of "freedom" as a temporary possibility made manifest in dance acts as a grounding assumption available to researchers who joined into the project.

This book reflects research presentations from the first four meetings of the project. A fifth, summary symposium took place November 6–9, 2025 at Northwestern University.

At these meetings, embodied researchers, all specialists in Black Dance and Black social formations, gathered to imagine relevant research methods that underscore the theoretical and experiential complexity of movements we call Black Social Dance. Six research cities were been chosen to provide a wealth of information about how Black Social Dance Moves: Atlanta, Detroit, Los Angeles, Miami, Minneapolis, and Chicago.

The project continues to produce a number of research outputs, including this special anthology of original writings featuring materials from the participating researchers of the first four symposia, and a larger, separate volume of research, each edited by Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow Webster B. McDonald and Principal Investigator Thomas F. DeFrantz. For more information about the project, and to access moving image documentation of the research symposia, please see slippage.org.

Acknowledgements:

This volume, originally conceived as a chapbook but now surely more than that somehow, arrives to share the ideas of twenty-eight researchers participating in the first four iterations of the Race, Black Dance, and the Embodied Geographies of Freedom project, and our collective connection with the millions of souls whose dance gestures have encouraged us. Shireen Dickson, Managing Director of the SLIPPAGE laboratory, has supported this project from its initial conception through its ongoing assemblies and outputs, always moving with fierce flair, confidence, and admirable poise. There is little that Dickson cannot figure out. Many researchers have worked on this project as attendees, witnesses, dancers, friends and family, colleagues, and the like; thanks to all who think carefully with Black Social Dance. The Research Officers in the School of Communication at Northwestern University deserve thanks for continuous responsiveness; thank you Sheri Carsello, Molly Losh, and Annemarie Diaz. Micaela Brinsley performed urgent editorial labor to move this publication forward; thank you Mic! The outrageously strong design for this volume has been executed with great care by Damon Smith of theunloved.co.uk. The dancing will not be denied; what if we continue to move with its wonders, knowing just a bit more about how it emerges and reveals itself?

SLIPAGE

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Thomas F. DeFrantz, Director