Moving While Black: Black Dance and the EmBOD(Y)ment of Social Movement as Theory, History, and Practice

by

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Middletown, Connecticut April, 2018
We
Who have nothing to lose
Must sing and dance
Before the riches
Of the world
Overcome
Us.

We
Who have nothing to lose
Must laugh and dance
Lest our laughter
Goes from
Us.

-Langston Hughes, *Black Dancers*
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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And finally to the Chambers family whose blood and memories pulse through my veins. The sounds of your voices are as imprinted into my mind as the rhythmic beat of the drum. Thank you all for the laughter and tears. Thank you for molding my mind. Thank you for inspiring me to dance. Te quiero mucho.
To my readers:

As a requirement of the Dance major, this thesis is paired with two 10-minute choreographed works. It would be ideal if you could take the time to watch the video recordings of my two works as I reflect on the dances extensively in chapter four. Here is a link to my choreography:

*only we know:*

https://drive.google.com/open?id=1L3d6VNUuntlH2-aYEw5EnWYTQt4-WOIa

*Say It Loud!:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1phMOa_EhnLcoNdUItBSuCJ7MdFEG6ZhQ/view?usp=sharing
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Introduction

MOVING Forward

“To plow even more deeply into [the] beautiful black grounds.”

My entry into the work

An obsession led me to this work. Brooklyn-based choreographer, Reggie Wilson, with whom I interned during the 2017 summer, has said many times that he does not believe in inspiration; in the sudden flash of mental stimulus that leads one towards their passion. Instead, he turns his attention towards his “obsessions”. An “obsession,” far more interesting, is the reoccurrence of a thought or idea in our minds and in our environment. Over this past year, one thing that has continuously and urgently called my attention was dance, and not choreographed dance but the improvised, unpredictable social dance. When I started researching social dance, I realized that it was Black dance in particular that I was passionate about. However, this curiosity of the ways in which Black culture, specifically Black dance, has and continues to strongly influence the popular music and dance of the world left me uneasy. There were so many stories unfinished when it comes to this subject. Dance and dancers of these time periods, many considered successful, have not warranted thorough research and analysis. They were the footnote or the short quote but far less often the primary topic of investigation. Academic interest in dance in the western world, or the lack thereof, has been influenced by a history of religious intolerance of the body and its

1 Thomas F. DeFrantz, Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance (Madison, Wis.: U of Wisconsin, 2002) preface xi.
connection to racial categorization and human sexuality. From this stance any study of Black dance was doubly daunting. My goal then became to contribute to the tugging of Black dance history out from the margins of Black studies and dance studies. Moving forward with this goal in mind, I began to collect any and all scholarship that has previously been done on Black dance, however as we will see in later chapters, past academic works when discussing African American dance dedicates the majority of the volume to companies and choreographers such as Katherine Dunham (1909-2006) Pearl Primus (1919-1994), Alvin Ailey (1931-1989), and Donald McKayle (b.1930). This trend of scholars has resulted in discussions on social dance only as a precursor to concert dance. In my thesis, I will be adding to the archive of dance with a focus on social dance as I do not feel that I can do full justice to the social dance sphere itself if I divert attention to stage performance.

“Even when dance is shown to play a critical part in sustaining social institutions, the properties that enable it to do so are rarely discussed.”

This research project is an attempt to reposition Black dance within Black cultural history and the larger American history, I have identified the embodied movement of social dance sphere and the social movement of the sociopolitical sphere as two places that unite a diverse Black community through the construction of a singular identity with aesthetic principles to match. Reflecting on the capacity for mobilization in these two spaces: The Black community in the United States has a track record of responding to a difficult racial atmosphere with organizing efforts targeting

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racial treatment. Every social movement within U.S. Black History has had the goal of improving the social, political and/or economic status of the Black community. Similarly, the social dance sphere has brought together Black people both in leisure and competition.

As I go forward and reflect on the links between social dance and social movement, I will draw upon questions commonly asked in social movement scholarship, specifically: When and why do movements occur? How are they organized? Who joins or supports movements? Specifically, how did they all come together? And why were they compelled to action? What determines the trajectory of a movement? Particularly, who remains in the movement, who drops out, and why? And what changes were achieved through the movements? I will then apply each of these questions to the social dance scenes during the previously mentioned time periods. My first level of questions will ask: Where and how were specific Black dances developed/ performed by the Black community? How do they spread? Who takes part in these dances? How are the spaces for social dancing constructed? What determines the trajectory of a social dance? Particularly, what makes a social dance popular, what makes it die out, and why? My second line of question asks: How were issues common in everyday society translated into the social dance sphere (e.g. style, dialogue, racial segregation/ integration/ tension, etc.)? Essentially, how was racial performativity and racial mobility impacted by attempts to redefine Blackness during Black social movement in the U.S.? All of this will contribute to a greater look into how racial performativity and racial mobility intersects with attempts to redefine Blackness and the Black community during social movement.
Thesis Statement

This thesis will look at Black social dance as a battleground for social change in the Black community. It will delve into the exploratory space of social dance to see how Black people have interpreted, interacted with, and impacted the larger socio-political atmosphere of their time and how social dancing has been critical to the historical formation of Black identity and the Black aesthetic. I will be engaging with two social movements that accentuate a larger shift in the social, political, and economic status of Black people: the Harlem Renaissance (1917-1930) and the Black Power Movement (1965-1985). The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural reawakening for the Black community ignited by the migration of thousands of Black people to the North for economic opportunities and cultural capital. The Black Power Movement was a revolutionary political, economic, and social movement that mobilized the people around the desire for a self-sufficient, uplifted Black community. The social dance scenes during these two movements functioned as a space to negotiate many of the struggles and changing dynamics within the Black community and between Black people and other racial groups. Through the dances, the music, the physical spaces, dancers, Black people have found new ways to establish and reimagine themselves in an American context.

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3 With respects to my two case studies, the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Power Movement, I want to point out that these two movements are not essential to the study and that my analytical eye could have been geared towards other social movements, however I was interested in exploring two movements that are less prevalent in U.S. education. Also, as this is a thesis in part for the dance department, I was attracted the sheer amount of dynamic social dances and music that came out of these two periods.
Ultimately this work seeks to continue the studies done by scholars of Black
dance performance by adding pieces to a fragmented and undocumented Black history.
Storytelling like dance has always been a Black tradition. The stories and details of Black
history, let alone Black dance history, from the transatlantic to today have been lost
within the official archive.\textsuperscript{4} In my reimagining of the archive, I aim to show that the
Black social dance sphere is a performative space in which Blackness and African
aesthetics are confirmed and in which Black people can be both proactive and reactive in
their movement through the socio-political world. I would like to encourage people to
further engage with social dancing and recognize it as a space for structural, cultural, and
personal change. I do not suggest that this thesis will encompass all that there is to know
about these two decades and Black dance but that it acts as a historical document
bringing together information in a thoughtful manner, information that will then act as a
source of inspiration for my two-part dance thesis installation.

\textbf{Literature/ Dance Genre Review}

A note on the research process that went into this thesis: my work has been
informed by both dance scholarship and U.S. race scholarship. Extremely influential on
bridging the gap between these two fields was the work done by Brenda Dixon
Gottschild in \textit{Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts}.
Gottschild’s groundbreaking work brings dance into discourse on the African influence

\textsuperscript{4} A reference to Saidiya Hartman’s “Venus in Two Acts” in which Hartman explores Venus, or
the black woman, in the archive of trans-Atlantic slavery and attempts through the practice of
critical fabulation to recover a Black history that has been lost to the dominant History.
on American culture. She theorizes that the African presence, although it has been made invisibile as is the nature of U.S. racism, is actually a “conditioning factor” that has shaped performance in America both on and off the stage. 5 The impact of the African aesthetic on American culture which I found in Gottchild’s text was substantiated by and applied to the historical information on Black social dance during the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Power Movement in Lynne F. Emery’s Black Dance: From 1619 to Today and Edward Thorpe’s Black Dance. Emery’s text, in its second revised edition, presents a history of Black dance in the United States from dance and movement onboard the ships in the Transatlantic Slave Trade to Black dance and performance of the 80s with additional details on the Caribbean, U.S. plantations, NY dance halls and numerous other spots of the African diaspora. Thorpe’s Black Dance follows a similar structure in addition to the influence of black dance on ballet and modern dance forms. I take on Emery and Thorpe’s attempt to chronicle this history but choose to narrow in on the specified time periods as to avoid a pattern of glazing over black dancers and their contributions to dance culture in the U... For the purposes of creating literature that I would want to read, I take on scholar Richard C. Green’s efforts of putting forth literature on African American dance history that does not contradict the nature of “black dance”. Rather than presenting a canonical documentation of the work of black dancers, specifically those in concert dance, I will emphasize black dance

5 While the work of Brenda Dixon Gottschild was monumental in shaping my scholarly understanding of the African presence in American culture and no study of race and dance would be complete without mentioning her, I do not go on to reference her work in the following chapters as my goal is not to examine the Africanist aesthetic principles in European American popular culture (although it comes up) but rather to center this narrative on the Black community and the efforts made to shape and define that group identity.
with respects to an overarching black culture and sociopolitical climate. The works of Thomas F. DeFrantz, a Black scholar concentrating in African diaspora aesthetics, dance historiography, and the intersections between dance and technology\(^6\) has been one of the most influential resources for this paper. I rely on DeFrantz’s *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance* (2002) and *Black Performance Theory* co-edited with Anita Gonzalez as frameworks for evaluating “Black” and “African American” as racial and dance categories. *Dancing Many Drums* holds a collection of essays on a range of topics from the blues aesthetic and Katherine Dunham’s *Southland*, a ballet about lynching, to African Dance in New York and the New York Negro Ballet in Great Britain to reflect on the influence of Black movement and music on American and world culture. Also containing a collection of essays, *Black Performance Theory* explores blackness as conveyed through the performative imaginary of choreographers, playwrights, and singers. Each of the texts I have mentioned brings together issues of race, culture, gender, politics, history, and dance in a manner that reads as authentic and true to the aesthetic principles of Black dance. Collectively, they form the structure on which I have built this thesis.

**Methodology**

The backbone of this work lies at the intersection of performance studies, cultural studies, and race and ethnicity studies. It utilizes a three prong methodology that pair well with the intersections I will attempt to prove between embodied movement and

social movement. From theories on blackness to African aesthetic theory, I make sense of a historical link between social movement and embodied movement in Black culture. I then introduce a qualitative historical analysis of the production of Black identity during times of heightened political and social change as it is constructed in the social dance sphere. This hybrid methodology engages with social and cultural texts such as music, video, and photography and the cultural information that they provide. In my studies of aesthetics, I have come to understand that the perceptibility of semiotic phenomenon and the aesthetic dimension is often registered on an instinctive level and for that reason visualizing the people and places that I will describe presents another way for me to push my analysis. I continue to ground my study with the third layer of methodology in which I overlap movement analysis with the historical and theoretical base I establish. A more personal underpinning to my research is a desire to contextualize the existence of Black social dancers in the U.S. like myself through a historical lenses in a way that is authentic to both Black cultural expression and the environment that informs the Black experience.

**Chapter Outline**

Much of my entry into the written scholarship is informed by my collegiate work in American Studies, although I do often draw upon the works of Dance scholars. In the crafting of this thesis, I wanted this text to simultaneously function as an immersive experience which is why I have incorporated a music playlist, which I invite readers to listen to while reading, made up of songs referenced throughout this thesis (Appendix A)
as well as structured my three sections as phrases. The three phrases (theory, history, and practice) each provide a different angle into the theme of embodying social movement.

Phrase one, theory, offers a speculative approach to black dance. Chapter one asks: How has identity been formed in the U.S.? How has Black identity been understood through the body and through Black dance? Following that thought, what exactly is Black dance and how do dances and dancers come to fall under this category? It asks in what ways has Black dance been an integral part of constructing Black identity and aesthetic principles? The second phrase, history, takes us into chapter two and three. These two chapters track a historical relationship between Black social dance and Black social movement giving long overdue attention to people, places, groups, and dances often “relegated to footnote status.” Chapter two focuses on the concentrated, close-knit and artistically flourishing Black community of the Harlem Renaissance. It puts the New Negroes in conversation with the social dancers of Harlem to reflect on points of intersection and divergence between these two groups. From a wider look at the dancing body in Harlem to a closer examination of New York’s Savoy ballroom, this chapter explores economic opportunity, contested space, identity formation and the nothing less than complex relationship between the Harlem Renaissance and Black dance. Chapter three without disregarding the sociological, psychological, and historical precedents for the development of the Black Power Movement (BPM), enters the mid-

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7 DeFrantz, Dancing Many Drums, preface x.
8 In the following chapters, I will reference a variety of examples (e.g. people, places, groups and dances). In the context of this thesis, I use persons, space, and thing as interchangeable examples to the extent that they reflect Black aesthetic principles.
9 New Negroes were Black and men of middle-class orientation that distinguished themselves from the “Old Negroes” through their to submit to a Jim Crow, racially segregated, America.
60s into the 70s and narrows in on the cultural factors that allowed for the Black Power Movement to develop. From the Black Arts Movement, an outgrowth of BPM to an immersive look at funk through Soul Train and Parliament Funk, this chapter explores social dance as a liberatory tactic and the Black body as inherently political. The final phrase, practice, reflects on the choreographic works which I have created in tandem to the written thesis following the African American tradition in which “the act itself supersedes its discussion.”\textsuperscript{10} As a requirement for the dance department, senior dance majors choreograph two 10-minute piece for the Fall Thesis Dance and the Spring Thesis Dance. In this fourth chapter, I will discuss how my dance practice influenced and was influenced by my written thesis. Each of these works are my translation of the kinesthetic threads that I see in all Black social dances regardless of the time period. My first choreographic work, \textit{only we know} is a movement exploration of Black social dance, street culture, and the gendered body in the social dance. My second dance, \textit{Say It Loud!}, is a character-based narrative that navigates the relationship between four Black social dances of different decades as they urgently come together to move through the memories of their body and their ancestry; to nurture the sacredness of the dance. Although I have divided this thesis into 3 distinct phrases, I intend for there to be overlap between the sections so that theory merges with history as well as with embodied practice as to fully articulate the potency and wide reach of Black social dance.

\textsuperscript{10} DeFrantz, preface x.
Phrase I: THEORY
Chapter One

Being Black: Social Dance and Social Movement

The Identity “Race”

Navigating the relationship between social movement and social dance as it concerns Black bodies requires a backtracking of sorts. Before recognizing the cultural formation of Black identity and aesthetic principles through dance, this chapter will take a look back at the formation of Blackness and open up a discussion about race. As this thesis deals with lived experience, I argue that this discussion of race does not operate against efforts to deconstruct “race” but is critical for revealing the link between creative spaces like the social dance sphere and sociopolitical behavior. This chapter then is fashioned around questions some of which are: How has “race” been constructed? In what ways is it an extension of human social grouping? And how has its usage varied throughout time? How are the social expressions of race-- racial treatment and racial performativity-- negotiated in public spaces? With this line of thought, I venture to frame a working narrative for the concepts of race and Blackness beginning with the history of race as a primary mode of human classification.

Human society has always sought out ways to constitute itself. Social theorists look at the ways in which humans relate to one another and society as it is, was, and as we desire it to be.\(^1\) The tendency has been to establish social structures, norms, and power relations;\(^2\) to prescribe a narrative of origin with rules of inclusion and exclusion. Prior to the 16th century, the church in Western culture was a structuring mechanism,


classifying people through religion-based categories. The celestial realm, the heaven and sky, was valorized while the terrestrial region was negatively marked. Within this context, there were three categories of being: Christians, Idolaters (Muslims and Jews), and Pagans (non-monotheistic religions). Amongst the Christians, the clergy who were ordained for religious duties, were the optimal status criterion that people ought to live up to whereas the laity, or ordinary people, were marked as innately cowardly. Each category of person within this schema was defined by their relationship or lack thereof to God. Set in motion as early as the end of the 13th century, the 1500s experienced a drastic overhauling of this conception of being. Retrospectively termed Renaissance Humanism, this new mode of thinking emphasized human agency, individually and collectively, and valued a terrestrial, modern world. Prizing rationalism and empiricism over dogma and superstition, this period experienced a reconceptualization in the order of knowledge so that being human was no longer religiously defined but instead defined by “man”. “Man” came to be the first secular criteria of being human.

Over time, as people continued to explore human existence, without the church as a core organizing force, classification of humans was redirected towards race. Race was defined as an identifiable group of people who shared common ancestry. However,

14 Eudell.
15 Eudell.
16 The term derived from the program of studies called the ‘studia humanitatis’, but the idea of calling this ‘Humanism’ only really arose in the nineteenth century.
mid-nineteenth century racial anthropology\textsuperscript{19} ensured that the term “race” was synonymous with that which diverged from Eurocentric norms, notably European conceptions of whiteness.\textsuperscript{20} Usually left undefined, whiteness is the epistemology of race and it “relies upon the essentialist and non-relational understanding of identity.”\textsuperscript{21} Whiteness is shaped by what it is now and therefore race was grounded in the othering of people of color. It became a politically and culturally motivated label that “set the terms of belonging and exclusion within modern institutions”.\textsuperscript{22} Embedded in this racial stratification, Black and white were on opposite ends of the spectrum. As a result, Black people were and continue to be the ontological others. Following, the racialized Black body is then treated as a public entity that needs to be under constant surveillance and management.

Discussion on the Black body in public spaces, expressly in the U.S. context, must be contextualized by the system of chattel slavery (1619-1865). The chattel slavery of African peoples that endured in the United States is one example of the institutionalization and performance of racial categories. Chattel slavery was a legal system in which enslaved peoples were the personal property of their owners to be subjugated, forced to labor, commodified, and sold as decided by the slave master.\textsuperscript{23} The Black body put on display during this era would become the prototype for visualizing the

\textsuperscript{19} Racial anthropology is the pseudoscientific belief in racialized biological determinism. This means that it suggests that empirical evidence can be used to classify people and subsequently ascribe specific races as superior or inferior.

\textsuperscript{20} DeFrantz, Dancing Many Drums, 3.


\textsuperscript{23} W.C. MacLeod, "Some Aspects of Primitive Chattel Slavery" (Social Forces 4.1, 1925) 137.
Black body in public spaces, an image that would remain, but not unchallenged, in American subconsciousness up until the present day. In order to maintain this economically-beneficial system of slavery, the United States enforced *partus sequitur ventrem*. Derived from Roman law, this legal doctrine meant “that which is brought forth follows the womb.”\(^{24}\) As long as one's condition followed that of their mother, most Africans in the United States, would continue to be classified as “slave”. The title “slave” not only dehumanized African people but placed them at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Later, coming out of the slave system, marked by the 13th Amendment, African people had developed social ties and a sense of community which didn’t exist amongst their elders on the African continent. The formation of these social ties is significant to social capital theory which, as relayed by Robert Putnam, proposes that social networks operate at the level of the individual, the community, and the society.\(^{25}\) Strong social ties usually existing amongst kin and close friends work to reinforce these networks linking individuals to resources such as information and identity.\(^{26}\) In the case of the diasporic African, the ties created during this period would give the resource of selfhood and community. Having lost tribal affiliations, kinship ties, language, and other cultural attributes, they took advantage of the opportunity to recreate their identity by naming themselves.


\(^{26}\) Rademacher, 1213
What’s in a Name?

Names are one way in which social ties are acknowledged. To self-name is to have the agency to invent and reinvent oneself through the “symbols that are used to designate positions” in our world. Identity scholarship agrees that names and identity determine what we see and what we feel. For example, “slave” was a name imposed on Africans in the U.S. by colonizers but future group identifiers would be determined by the Black community and would reflect their increasing agency. During the early 1800s, Freedman (once enslaved, now emancipated people) and enslaved people alike used the term “African” to preserve a connection to their ancestry and to forge a community in the New World. Interestingly, “African” is not an indigenous identity used back on the African continent but an English word used to describe the continent by the Romans. The name, completely removed from the ethnic groups it described, is derived from either the Latin word *aprica* (sunny) or the Greek word *aphrike* (without cold). From this point on, Africans in the America and their descendants would try on different labels each lacking in one aspect on another. In the 1830s, the Freedman faced with “Back to Africa” campaigns organized to find a new identity marker that highlighted their refusal to return to Africa, one that asserted their American status. Their determination to

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28 This section speaks towards the broader acceptance of these identifiers within the Black community as opposed to when they first were used in the English language.

29 Freedman were African people who were emancipated from the slave system. Tom Smith, "Changing Racial Labels: From "colored" to "Negro" to "Black" to "African American" *(Public Opinion Quarterly, 56, 1992)* 507.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 E. Smith, E.. BLACK SEPARATISM -- NOT NOW, NOT EVER. *Headway, 8*, 18.((1996, Jan 31), Web, 5 Jan. 2018
conceive a new identity, thus taking ownership over labels that have historically
ostracized Black people, was a transformative act. For the Freedman this decision was
complicated by differing visions of the institutional and ideological means by which
Black liberation could be achieved (integrationist vs nationalism advocates). Many who
were freed before the 13th Amendment settled on “Colored” as it was accepted by both
Whites and Blacks. It also encompassed a greater range of people including mulattos
and mixed raced individuals. However, the inclusivity of the word convinced others that
it was not right. While the shift in name positioned Freedman, and their brothers and
sisters in bondage, as bound to America as opposed to a distant Africa, influential Black
leaders like Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) and W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963)
advocated for the name “Negro” as it was “etymologically and phonetically… much
better and more logical than ‘African’ or ‘colored’ or any of the various hyphenated
circumlocution” in addition to being the “stronger term”. It was specific to Black
people of color but “Negro” also came with derogatory baggage specifically its
connection to the term “nigger”. While Negro eventually became more widely accepted
between the two terms, “Colored” did not disappear. We see “Colored” used by
organizations such as the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of

accountid=14963>
33 Sterling Stuecky, Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America. (New York:
34 Smith, 497.
35 Kelly Miller (1937) discusses the connotation of “Negro” and the deep-seated, philosophical
meaning embodied in its usage being stronger than that of “Colored”. Ibid.
36 Ibid, 497.
Colored People), a group that would strengthen the ties of Black people and guide the community in future social movements.

The terms “Negro” and “Colored” are rarely used today by Americans of the African diaspora, instead the debate on racial identifiers has shifted to the terms Black and African American.\(^{37}\) Amongst the Black community today, many assume the two labels are synonymous while others hold strong opinions in one direction or the other.\(^{38}\) Black emerged with a larger sentiment of group consciousness in the second half of the 1960s when “Negro” was seen as a symbol of Uncle Tomism.\(^{39}\) In contrast “Black” stood for “racial pride, militancy, power, and rejection of the status quo.”\(^{40}\) Stokely Carmichael, chairman of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) used the term “Black Power” in 1966 following his arrest in a protest march in Mississippi.\(^{41}\) Black continued to appear in the speeches and texts of influential groups such as the Black Panther Party (1966-1982) and Black Muslims (est.1930).\(^{42}\) It was used by progressives and radicals alike. Like previous generations had said about “Colored” and “Negro”, the black population of this time believed that Black held strength. With that said, one critique of Black is that this inclusive category exists in opposition to

\(^{37}\) Another term that should be added to this conversation is Afro-American. During the transition period between Negro and Black many suggested Afro-American as it linked the people to both past and present.

\(^{38}\) This discussion is only taking into consideration those who would self-identity under these labels and not the ways in which white people and other people of color would identify us.

\(^{39}\) Uncle Tom is the title character of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin. The name took on a derogatory nature representing any excessively subservient black person, particularly those aware of their lower-class status.

\(^{40}\) Smith, 499.


\(^{42}\) Black Muslims in this context refers to the Nation of Islam.
white. In his famous “I Have A Dream” speech, Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968) uses “Negro” except in the four cases when he needed an adjective that could be paired with white.\textsuperscript{43} In those cases, he used “Black” (e.g. “black men as well as white men”).\textsuperscript{44} The example of Martin Luther King Jr. highlights the predicament where most understandings of Black people and Blackness are tied to a historically constructed understanding of white people and whiteness. With that said, this Black-white binary existed long before the Black community ever sought out the new moniker. We see it in the comparisons of day and night, light and darkness, and good and evil. And despite this black-white dualism which positions black as less desirable, Black embodies a hope and a strength birthed out of the Black Power Movement (1965-1985) and popular campaigns such as “Black pride” and “Black is beautiful.”\textsuperscript{45} It creates an “imaginary cultural coherency,” where members of the diaspora can grasp onto a variety of histories, community ties, and degrees of lineage to the African nation.\textsuperscript{46} It reaches out beyond borders to incorporate all those of the African diaspora from Haiti and Jamaica to Nigeria and the United States.

Today, many people identify as Black but there are also numerous Americans who identify as African-American. African-American is a term coined by late 1980s Civil Rights leaders. In December 1988 at a meeting of Black leaders in Chicago, Ramona H. Edelin, president of the National Urban Coalition (1971-1988) proposed a change from

\textsuperscript{43} Smith, 501.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} DeFrantz, 4.
“Black” to “African-American”. Reverend Jesse Jackson, Civil Rights activist, politician, and organizer of the aforementioned meeting, campaigned for this term suggesting that “Black” was as unfit as “Colored” and “Negro”. He also made comparisons to other ethnic groups that use the hyphenated identity (e.g. Chinese-American, Italian-American, and Arab-American) to argue for its value in connecting past roots to present place. Edelin advocacy for the shift to African-American could be read as “the first step in the cultural offensive.” It marked a shift from “race” to ethnicity as the primary characteristic of the group; a shift towards “cultural integrity”. Directing attention towards culture as a means of advancement, in theory would put Blacks on the same level as other ethnic groups and change their image in the nation and around the world. This all, however, did not protect the label African-American from debate. On one hand, it has a historic-geographic context, yet it can be critiqued for lacking specificity and claiming a vague Africa that most have no recollection of. Still, the hyphenated identity of African American recognizes cultural hybridity and invention. The duality, the African with the American, provides a “reconstructed identity” that highlights the fluctuating nature of identity -- rupturing the notion of identity as fixed and biologically determined. For this thesis I will use each racial moniker when contextually accurate but in cases where it is a matter of preference, Black will be the identity descriptors I use as it has an uncomfortable relationship with authenticity (e.g. “Will the Real Black Man

47 Smith, 503.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid, 507.
50 Ibid, 507.
51 DeFrantz, Dancing Many Drums, 4.
Please Stand Up?”) that correlates with notions of authenticity performed in social dance spaces (an idea that will be pursued in later chapters).

Nonetheless, each of these names that have been historically attached to the Black community paved the way for a bigger conversation about race. In the mid-1980s many began the practice of adding quotation marks to “race” to highlight their critique of race as a social category. The 80s saw the tension between “race” as a social construct versus “race” as a biological, critical, descriptive truth. Studies into the construction of “race” recognized that “race has rendered the body into a text on which histories of racial differentiation, exclusion, and violence are inscribed.”

Problematicizing race in this way did not negate the power of “race” as a concept or deny that racism exists, instead it reflected that our behaviors give truth to thing and provided a more nuanced position to think from. Political theorist and feminist, Nancy Fraser, contemplates “race” from this position. In *Redistribution to Recognition?* Fraser describes race as a “bivalent collectivity” meaning it suffers both “political-economic dimensions and cultural valuation dimensions” (288). On one hand, race in the United States, informed by a history of colonialism and slavery, structures our political economy particularly the division of labor. Historically, people of color have disproportionately held the low wage domestic positions meanwhile white people were privileged with better paid, better quality professional work. Still today, we see “race” as a

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53 DeFrantz, *Dancing Many Drums*, 3.
54 “Race.” *Keywords*, Web, 10 Jan. 2018, <keywords.nyupress.org/american-cultural-studies/essay/race/>
political-economic differentiation that produces race-specific modes of exploitation, marginalization, and deprivation. On the other hand, the cultural valuation dimension of race codes all things black, brown, and yellow as deviant. This is expressed in the physical, emotional, and psychological harms suffered by people of color including “marginalization in public spheres” and the “denial of full legal rights.” This understanding of “race” and the racist behaviors mapped onto it becomes particularly useful for understanding the formation of blackness, black social networks and black social dance.

**Black and Social Dancing**

As I previously mentioned, Black identity has been constructed through naming, but it has also been constructed through the actions of the people. This means that Black identity is not only institutionally powerful but it is experiential; it is a result of practical activity such as language (e.g. Ebonics), gesture, bodily significations and desires. Looking at enslaved people in the “New World” provides a powerful example of the surviving power of Black identity. The enslaved population of the “New World” which included the Ashanti, Congolese, Dahomean, Ibo, Koromantin, Yoruban, and other West African people maintained aspects of their African culture, specifically their ritual

56 Fraser, 289.
57 Ibid, 290.
59 The “New World” is one of many names given to the Americas by European explorers in the “age of discovery.”
dances, despite all colonizing attempts to de-Africanize them.\textsuperscript{60} So how do we understand dance, the artistic form that survived slavery and became a part of the cultural expression of black communities from different time periods and geographies? What is specific to African dance, turned Black dance, that each Black community has connected with and continues to pass down? To start, dance has always been concerned with the affairs of the person and the community particular as they relate to social issue. Deidre Skylar’s five premises for conceptualizing dance and movement within a cultural context are useful for understanding dance as a somatic communication device:\textsuperscript{61}

1. Movement knowledge is a kind of cultural knowledge. To speak of movement as a way of knowing implies that the way people move is as much a clue to who they are as the way they speak... If I move in an Episcopalian church the way I would in a Pentecostal, or if I dance in a ballet with the moves and aesthetic appropriate to a hula, I would immediately be recognized as "not belonging."

2. Movement knowledge is conceptual and emotional as well as kinesthetic. Embedded in the kneeling, sitting, and standing scenario of an Episcopalian church ritual is cognizance and acceptance of Christian doctrine. Embedded in the forms and aesthetics of ballet, as Joann Kealiinohomoku points out (1970: 31), are the concepts and values of European chivalry, in which are embedded, in turn, powerful conventions about idealized man-ness and woman-ness. The moves of church and stage literally embody culture-specific ideas about nature, society, and the cosmos.... they trigger emotions about these as well.

3. Movement knowledge is intertwined with other kinds of cultural knowledge.

4. One has to look beyond movement to get at its meaning. When a man in church slips into a kneel, he is not just doing something with his body; he is honoring a divine being. As a researcher, I need to know something about that being to understand the man's experience of kneeling.... The concepts embodied in movement are not necessarily evident in the movement itself. To understand movement as cultural behavior, one has to move into words.

5. Movement is always an immediate corporeal experience.


Movement is always an immediate corporeal experience. Although one must resort to words to understand the symbolic meaning of movement, talking cannot reveal what is known through the media of movement. The cultural knowledge that is embodied in movement is an emotional experience that depends upon cultural learning.

I reference these five premises to say that antiphonal, call and response, social dancing is intrinsically linked to Black tradition and knowledge. Black social dancing as referenced by scholar Thomas F. DeFrantz is a closed circle connecting its members across time and space; it is a survival tool of the diaspora. DeFrantz says that African diaspora dance is “a constellation of expressive practices and political circumstances” that will always lead us back to the body in motion. Within this cultural form, Black people, not only collaborate with one another. consciously and unconsciously, but also establish “a dynamic rapport with the presence of death and suffering.” Also adding to the theory of the circle with regards to black social dance, Frantz Fanon, a Martinican social philosopher and psychiatrist, said that:

the circle of the dance is a permissive circle: it protects and permits…. [It] may be deciphered, as in an open book, [as] the huge effort of a community to exorcise itself, to liberate itself, to explain itself. There are no limits- inside the circle.

Fanon is underlining the generative and healing quality of black dance and the safe spaces that is the dance sphere concepts which can be further understood through W.E.B. Du Bois theory of “double consciousness”. Du Bois defines “double consciousness” as:

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62 DeFrantz, Dancing Many Drums, 14.
63 Fischer-Hornung, 11.
64 DeFrantz, Dancing Many Drums, 14.
two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings ... in one dark body, whose
dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.\textsuperscript{66}

In reaction to this dual existence Black social dancing have also had to take on a two-part
role. It works to break down colonial structures and physically communicate resistance
to an oppressive society as well as demonstrating the black community’s creativity,
pleasure, celebration, and individual growths. These qualities position Black social dance
to interact and become a mode for social organizing.

**What is Black Dance?**

Understanding some of the ideas behind the ability of Black social dance to
impact and organize the people still leaves many questions to be answered with respects
to its practice. What does Black dance look like? Which dances and dancers fall under
this category? Do Black bodies always dance black? If race and dance have a direct
correlation, why do we have a “Black dance” category but not a “white dance” category?
Additionally, why has “Black dance” stuck with us when “the etymological predecessors,
such as “darky dance,” “colored dance”, and “Negro dance,” have not?\textsuperscript{67} While I don’t
suggest that I can answer these questions, I can put forth some ideas for consideration
when “Black Dance” is used. The term “Black Dance” as we know it was introduced as a
performance category in the 1960s even though social dances emerged from Black
people in the US from the 1800s through the 1950s. The terms impetus correlated to the
Black Arts Movement (1965-1975), a title given to politically motivated Black artists,

\textsuperscript{66} Du Bois, 3.
\textsuperscript{67} DeFrantz, 5.
poets, dramatists, writers, and performers in the wake of the Black Power Movement. The primary goal of the Black Arts Movement was to collectively define a “black aesthetic.” This aesthetic principle would establish a new standard of judgement that was explicitly opposed to Western aesthetic ideals. However, White critics, on the other hand, employed “black dance” as a shorthand for work they felt uncomfortable with or unprepared to address; all topics relating to black marginalization fell under this category.

Using “Black dance” requires a cost-benefit analysis of sorts. While the label does encourage a joint, powerful Black identity; it also runs the risk of limiting all that exist within its confines. It creates a fantasy that the black community is homogenous with singular economic and political interests that reveal themselves in the expressive culture. It also reinforces the Black-White binary. Scholars like, Edward Thorpe, discuss the differences between dances of white and Black origin. Thorpe examined all forms of dance presented by white people whether they be folk dances, social dances, court dances or the highly elaborate and ‘artificial’ techniques of classical ballet and found that “the torso is held comparatively erect, if not rigid, the head and shoulders, limbs and feet giving whatever amount of expression may be intended…. It may sway or bend a little, the shoulders may lift and turn in counterpoint with the hips but, compared to Black dances, the movement is minimal.” Celtic clog dancing may be the first example that comes to mind but take a look at the Spanish flamenco:

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68 DeFrantz, Dancing Many Drums, 5.
69 Fischer-Hornung, 12.
The torso (from the base of the pelvis to the top of the head) in flamenco dance has distinct attributes in common with the use of the torso in bullfighting. An exaggeratedly erect posture is valued in both movement practices, yet torso mobility is also essential. There are three interrelated attributes of posture that are distinctive to the cultural context of flamenco dance and bullfighting: (1) verticality is stressed; the upper body (head and thorax) and lower body (pelvis) often move in isolation or in contradiction to one another; and (3) the mobility of the pelvis is facilitated by the lift, control, and stability of the upper body.\footnote{Adair Landborn, \textit{Flamenco and Bullfighting: Movement, Passion and Risk in Two Spanish Traditions} (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015) 206.}

Thorpe contrasts the flamenco and other white social dances to black dance where the core of all movement is the pelvis. When describing the pelvis, Thorpe says that:

> It may thrust back and forth or rotate…. It may shake and shimmy from side to side and transmit these vibratory, gyratory movements to almost every other joint in the body, the back, the shoulders, neck, elbows, knees and ankles, so that the performer seems almost convulsed or galvanically charged.\footnote{Thorpe, 13.}

He may have overemphasized the role of the pelvis but he does highlight the freedom of movement that is permitted by the grounded nature of African and African diasporic dances. Dance historian Kariamu Welsh Asante says that the earth is the central locus for African dance, so the feet are interacting with the ground during stops, slides, shuffles, pounding, jumping, or leaping. Dancer Pearl Primus explained that:

> The African dancer uses the earth as if it were an extension of the dancer’s own feet… This love and respect for the earth is one of the main factors of African dance… for it draws up into the dancer the unlimited force and ecstasy of the earth.\footnote{Kariamu.}

Thorpe, Asante, and Primus point to a larger stance that Black dances are not only linked by “race” but “aesthetic similarities”. These elements remain at the foundation of Black social dances even as the structure changes; they are a “technology of stylization.”\footnote{Gena Caponi-Tabery, \textit{Signifying(s), Sanctifyin’ & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture} (Amherst: U of Massachusetts, 1999) 8.} One

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\textsuperscript{72} Thorpe, 13.
\textsuperscript{73} Kariamu.
\textsuperscript{74} Gena Caponi-Tabery, \textit{Signifying(s), Sanctifyin’ & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture} (Amherst: U of Massachusetts, 1999) 8.
aforementioned aesthetic similarity is the interdependent playfulness between participants seen in the call and response form of black social dances. Asante distinguishes seven “senses” at the core of the African aesthetic: polyrhythm, polycentrism, curvilinear form, shape, and structure; dimensionality; epic memory; repetition; and holism. Many of these aesthetic senses can be classified under anatomy, musicality, or artistry:

**Anatomy** is looking at the way the body tends to move in black social dancing. The core is grounded giving balance to the body. The pelvis is the source of movement but every part of the body is of equal importance; this is known as polycentrism.

**Musicality** is referencing the polyrhythmic, syncopated, arrhythmic to rhythmic, percussive qualities of black social dances. It also describes the triangular relationship between the dancer, the orality and the drum in African diasporic dance. After conducting research in the early 1940’s, Pearl Primus wrote of the linguistic features of African diasporic dance and the relationship between dance and drum:

> On my trips south of the Mason and Dixon line in 1944 I discovered in the Baptist Churches the voice of the drum - not in any instrument, but in the throat of the preacher.” She continues to conclude that in "emotional impact, group reaction, rhythms, tempos, actual steps and the exact precision with which they were done, dance in the Southern Baptist Churches so closely resemble the dance in Africa as to leave no doubt in the mind that the American form emerged from the African.”

If we can accept that the dance responds to the drum, not solely in a reactive manner, but within a configuration of communicative collaboration, we can

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75 Caponi-Tabery, 25.
understand how dance is performative, mirroring the way in which speech may be equated with action. Dance movements convey speech-like qualities which contain meaning beyond the formal, aesthetic shapes and sequences of movement detailed by the body in motion.

Artistry might be the most significant of all. In black social dances, the dancer works with improvisation as choreography building a dynamic rapport between the individual and the community. There is a value of individual flare as opposed to direct imitation and an embodiment of a “cool” aesthetic. The aesthetic of cool navigates pleasure, responsibility, gravitas, and play so that “the purer, the cooler a person becomes, the more ancestral he becomes.” Each of these aesthetic qualities, the artistry, anatomy, and musicality of black social dance, are grounded in a sense of community and emphasize a kind of cultural learning.

These three aesthetic principles when recognized in another social dancer reinforce the social ties of the Black community. They also contribute to a base level of movement which social dancers can then improvise on, discovering more about themselves in the process.

Conclusion

In chapter one, I determined that a look into the foundation on which Black dance and aesthetics stand necessitated a look at the human tendency to group ourselves, the secular category that is race, the hierarchized way of identifying, the invention of a

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“Black race” through a history of enslavement and institutionalized degradation, and the formation of a Black culture and aesthetic in resistance to this chronology— one that is constantly shifting to combat the shifting forms of oppression. All of this prepared the grounds on which Black social dancing sprouts from. Chapter one surmised that the movement knowledge that is Black social dance with its specific musical, anatomical, artistic, and communicative sensibilities is an expression of Black identity and also a space for the solidification of social networks. As I transition into chapter two and examine Black social dance as it operated during the Harlem Renaissance, I retain my awareness of a nuanced racial history and will use that to navigate the junction of Black social dance and Black social movement.
PHRASE II: HISTORY
Chapter Two

Black Dance, Building Community, and Integration during the Harlem Renaissance

Hop down front then Doodle back
Moob to your left then Moob to the right
Hands on your hips and do the Mess Around,
Break a Leg until you’re near the ground
Now that’s the old Black Bottom Dance

Now listen folks, open your ears
This rhythm you will hear--
Charleston was on the afterbeat--
Old Black Bottom will make you shake your feet,
Believe me, it’s wow.
Now lean this dance somehow
Started in Georgia and it went to France
It’s got everybody in a trance
It’s a wing, that old Black Bottom dance.
-Perry Bradford’s The Original Black Bottoms (1919)

In 1919, black songwriter, Perry Bradford, wrote these lyrics to the Black Bottom dance, something he had done for many other dances he witnessed in the South. This instructional song took a decade-old, jook house dance and launched it into the popular realm for all to try. As a dance craze it was seen on the dance floor of Harlem’s best ballrooms and was performed in the 1924 African American show Dinah. However, many sources will tell you that the dance was truly commercialized and became a national phenomenon thanks to the white actress, dancer, and singer and

78 Jook houses are commonly known as “Black bawdy houses for drinking, dancing, and gambling” Thorpe Black Dance p.65. Jook is “the anglicized pronunciation of ‘djugu,’ a word from the Gullah dialect of the African Bambara tribe meaning ‘wicked.’ Jook came to mean pleasure house.” Emery p.220 However, the “jook” also acted as a space for the creation and preservation of African American social dances. Furthermore, the “jook” and Black social spaces like it existed as a result of the economic, entrepreneurial initiative in the face of racial segregation laws and discrimination.
79 Thorpe, 65.
frequent Harlem visitor, Ann Pennington who performed the Black Bottom on Broadway in the 1926 show *Scandals*.\(^8\) This example marks the three step process commonly seen with black social dances: formation → innovation → appropriation. The Black Bottom was created in the South, tested out and embellished in Harlem, so that it was only second to the Charleston, and then adopted into and lauded in white theater. However, looking at the bigger picture, the Black Bottom’s dissemination into popular attention follows the migratory patterns of Black people from the ‘primitive’ West to the “cultured” East that was occurring across the nation. This historical point, the 20s, is important both for the sociopolitical shift in addition to the flood of culture and creativity that occurred within the Black community. However, I can’t do justice to the 20s without looking at the base of the Black community in New York; without looking into the Harlem Renaissance.

**The Harlem Renaissance (1910s- mid-1930s)**

The Harlem Renaissance, at the time called the New Negro Movement, is one of the most important movements in the United States for the Black community. This explosive cultural, social, political, and artistic movement was set in motion by the massive migration of Black citizens from southern USA to the north in the first decade of the twentieth century due to practical concerns. For example, during the 1920s there was a spike in crop failures which not only hurt the South’s agricultural economy but hurt southern Blacks who worked as sharecroppers and farm laborers.\(^8\) Simultaneously,

\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^8\) Ibid, 86.
the shortage of European immigrant labor as a result of World War I (1914-1918) 
created a demand for industrial workers in the North’s armament industry. The 
now-unemployed southern Black community was ready to fill this demand thus waves of 
Blacks headed to the North.\textsuperscript{82} A third reason for the migration of Blacks northward was 
the chance to escape racial violence enacted by the Klu Klux Klan and the larger 
southern white community that had become regular practice since Reconstruction 
(1865-1877). This change towards urban living coincided with people of African descent 
from the Caribbeans coming to the North seeking a better quality of life.\textsuperscript{83} It also 
coincided with WWI Black servicemen who had been treated with near-equality during 
wartime making a home in Harlem next to scholars, artists, and activists and realizing 
they were once again not respected by white America.\textsuperscript{84} All of these people found a new 
home in the large block of buildings purchased by African American realtors and church 
groups along 135th street and 5th avenue.\textsuperscript{85} This population shift was so drastic that one 
especially popular area for relocation, Harlem, had held 50,000 residents in 1914, 80,000 
in 1920 and 200,000 by the end of the 1920s.\textsuperscript{86} While they were no longer in the South, 
segregationist views forced many of the new migrants to bond together in this distinct 
“black neighborhood”. Still with relatively limited economic opportunities, artistic 
expression became an outlet for this Black community. Harlem was now the 

\begin{footnotesize}
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\footnotetext[82]{Ibid, 86.}
\footnotetext[83]{https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harlem_Renaissance}
\footnotetext[85]{Stern, 1.}
\footnotetext[86]{Thorpe, 86.}
\end{footnotes}
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well-established mecca for a Black community that had found its voice and was ready to express an emerging social consciousness.

The New Negroes of Harlem

The New Negroes, a term made popular by Alain LeRoy Locke (1885-1954), describes the group of black musicians, performers, artists and writers of the 20s/30s who set out on a quest to self-identify and create a new image for the Black community.

W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) was one of the voices pushing forth this movement for racial advancement through the debunking of prejudice stereotypes and the creation of Black-oriented creative works. In his famous work *Souls of Black Folks*, Du Bois presents the concept of double consciousness in which Black Americans find themselves:

> It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.  

As a result of this double-consciousness, Du Bois was adamant that all things related to Black aesthetics ought to be inherently political. If they were not propagandistic, Du Bois could not see what purpose they served to the Black community’s predicament in America.

In all the writings and discussions coming out of the New Negro Movement, one art form is absent; dance. This is because the New Negro Movement had a complicated relationship with dance, particularly black social dance. Harlem Renaissance artists

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believed that “dance served primarily as a symbol of the times.” They struggled to reconcile it with New Negro initiatives of the 20s and 30s which sought to present “a collective cultural product on par with European/ Euro-American tradition.” The concept of elevation of meaningful, high art on par with European-origin dances (e.g. Ballet) which permeated this movement in many ways proved that the Black aesthetic was still linked to whiteness but it also made for a warped view on Black folk and popular culture. Black social dance was categorized under entertainment and vernacular art. The term vernacular bears a negative connotation in this context as it is defined as the dance of ordinary people. This contrasts the reality of black social dance of this time in that it maintained rhythmically complex movements. If it were vernacular dance, why can’t everyone excel in it? The answer to this question isn’t important because the word vernacular is effective in disassociating black social dances from the concept of mastery, a concept often associated with dance forms that have European roots (e.g. Ballet). This tension between whiteness and blackness and what each of these terms permits/disallows seeps into the entire history of black social dances during the Harlem Renaissance.

Black Dance in the White Psyche

Understanding the relationship between black social dances and white people set the stage for understanding why black social dances were so popular yet so undervalued.

90 Fischer-Hornung, 63.
Nathan Huggins, a leading scholar in African-American studies, details how black stereotypes fit into the white psyche through sentimentalism. Huggins draws out how:

Harlem was a means of soft rebellion for those who rejected the.... sterility of their lives, yet could not find within their familiar culture the genius to redefine themselves in more human and vital terms. The Negro was their subversive agent- his music, manners, and speech.... The fantasy of Negro sexuality is fed by deep springs in the white psyche.... Negroes were that essential self one somehow lost on the way to civility, ghosts of one’s primal nature whose very nearness could spark electric race-memory of pure sensation untouched by self-consciousness and doubt.  

What Huggins begins to lay out is how the black individual has been historically positioned as the ontological other to the white person. A black person’s joy and creativity, their dance, is inherently disruptive or unique to white normative institutions. Looking intentionally at what art affords white people, it affords them temporary moments of disobedience. By “redefin[ing] themselves in more human and vital terms”, Huggins refers to how the black social dance is read as primitive, as giving into natural bodily urges in contrast to the values and structure which the mind provides. Within a white-dominated world, “the earthly side of the spiritual in dance is the sensual.” This aspect of Black dance is more visible than the spiritual for white viewers. As white people understand the black social dance space as a space for disobedience, sexual energy, and sensation, it becomes difficult to find a place for it amongst the “high arts” which are defined by their adherence to European ideals of beauty, taste, structure, and class.

91 Ibid, 24.
92 Ibid, 29.
New Negro Response to White Interpretation

The white conception of black social dance resulted in its negative stigma amongst many of the New Negroes. Words covering the social dances such as animalistic, sexuality, and temptation have had historical consequences for black bodies (read: colonization, enslavement, minstrelsy). Understanding how black social dance fits into the white mind, the New negroes were critical of these social dances and rejected them within their high art circles. Furthermore, the more European artists were drawn to the “Africanness” of it, the more many blacks of the Renaissance wanted to reject it. This line of thought was based in what Harlem Renaissance thinkers proclaimed as “the negro[es] dual role in society, that of acting as the advance guard of the African peoples in their contact with twentieth-century civilization, while also rehabilitating the race in the world esteem from the loss of prestige for which fate and the conditions of slavery had been largely responsible.” This meant that “art should lift up the image of the Negro in order to compensate for the humiliation of slavery.” Therefore, upper class blacks and anyone who aspired to join their rank could assert their status by conceding to white standards of art and leaving their lower class brothers with their easily stereotyped dances in the dust.

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93 Minstrelsy was an American form of entertainment that consisted of comic skits, variety acts, dancing, and music performances that mocked people specifically of African descent.
95 Fischer-Hornung, 32.
Is There a Place for Dance in the Movement?

While the popular black dance styles that dominated the rent parties, night clubs, cabarets, and musical theatre stages were considered too disreputable to count as “serious” artistic expression by most, another leading voice of this movement found in Alain Locke (1885-1954) presents a potential way for social dance to align with the core values and direction of the New Negro movement. Writer, philosopher, educator and patron of the arts, Alain Locke suggested that collective and collective consciousness could only exist if the status quo was deconstructed on political and cultural levels. Linking social and political changes to a developing Black aesthetic, Locke wrote *The New Negro* (1925/1974) which followed the development of the psychological, intellectual, social, and political life of the Negro in America in a collection of essays, plays, poetry and works of fiction. He put forth the idea that Black cultural expression enacts the sociopolitical atmosphere through its aesthetic and makes meaning of social and political justice, or the lack thereof. Referencing Harlem, Locke mentions that there was a “necessity for fuller, truer self-expression,” and “Harlem negro life was seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination.” In his words, I see the opportunity for Black social dances to achieve many of the goals which the New Negroes desired. On one level social dance functioned as a means of humanizing the marginalized, dehumanized black body. It was a way of “finding the soul.” And this is not a new idea, some Harlem renaissance thinkers were able to see this at the time. In

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97 Locke, x.
98 Fischer-Hornung, 27.
addition to its humanizing quality, writer and poet Claude McKay (1889-1948) wrote about social dance as abandon. He writes about the feeling of vivacity that dance can bring to the dancer and the viewer of dance. Visual artist, Aaron Douglas (1899-1979) reflects on this same characteristic of dance in a paper called “The Negro in American Culture”. He writes that:

The dance offered a field for unrestricted expression of Negroes’ creative passion. Here were no expensive instruments to be purchased, no weird symbols to be mastered, no unfamiliar tools and stubborn material to be overcome, only swift feet, strong legs, a lust for life, and a soaring imagination. With this limited equipment the Negro has kept folk dancing alive in America when it has died almost everywhere else in the world. He has not only kept the dance alive, but in a spontaneous, revolutionary, creative state.

The idea that we possess in our persons a revolutionary and liberating skill that has been lost in many places is important. The black social dance and its uplifting quality is invaluable in the face of the social death imposed on it by society.

Moving Black: The Dancing Body in Harlem

Continuing this exploration of social dance during the Harlem Renaissance movement, I turn to the physical dance spaces of Harlem to explore the day-to-day act of dancing in resistance. At this point in the 20s and 30s, the swing-style jazz music brought from the South and its corresponding dances were rising in popularity.

Ballrooms and nightclubs popped up along the Harlem streets such as the Apollo

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100 Matthew Baigell and Julia Williams, eds. Artists against War and Fascism (New Brunswick: Rutgers U P, 1986) 79.
101 Social death is a term coined by sociologist and historian of slavery, Orlando Patterson, in his 1982 book Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study. He uses the term to describe the condition where people are not fully excepted by society which he argues has internal and external consequences on the way those people view themselves and understand society (e.g. in the cases of U.S. slavery and the Holocaust).
Theater (est.1913) on 125th, Small’s Paradise (1925-1986) on 135th, Leroy’s (1935-1986) on 1345th, Cotton Club (1923-1940) on Lenox Ave & 14nd, and the Savoy (1926-1958) on Lenox Ave between 140th & 141st. Nightlife began at 11 PM and when the bigger venues closed, after-hour clubs offered music and food for those still immersed in Harlem’s vibrant culture. Every aspect from the dance space to the dances of the 20s was changing the game.

Welcome to The Savoy: “The Home of Happy Feet”

![Image](https://www.google.com/search?q=the+savoy+ballroom&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwriYk8DTT2IXaAhXRdlMKH1bwdMQ_AUIjCigB&biw=1920&bih=979#imgref=xLwWPDiQ4f8Krs)

Figure 1. The Entrance to the Savoy Ballroom on Lenox Ave, Harlem, NY. Photo retrieved from Pinterest.

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102 Thorpe, 87.
103 Stern, 1.
104 According to p.316 of Jazz Dance by the Stearns, the Savoy Ballroom was called “The Home of Happy Feet” as it was the place where it music and dance history was made. It was also called “The Track” by regulars possibly because it had at one point featured dog races.
Upon entering the Savoy Ballroom, you descended one floor to check your hat and coat at the one of several ornate counters staffed by a small army of attendants. Then you climbed two mirrored flights of marble steps until you found yourself in a teeming crowd at the middle of a black-long dance floor. Directly opposite, a raised double bandstand gleamed with instruments, and one of two bands was up there in full swing.\footnote{Stern, 321.}

The Savoy contained a spacious lobby framing a huge, cut-glass chandelier and marble staircase. Roomy basement checkrooms and carpeted and mirrored lounges served thousands of patrons per night. An orange-and-blue dance hall with a soda fountain, tables and heavy carpeting covering half its area abutted a polished, sprung wood floor commonly described as 250 feet by 50 feet, as long as a football field and about half as wide, though these measurements were probably exaggerated… A disappearing stage at one end, two bandstands holding the “best big bands in the nation” meant there was never a pause in the music, one band picking up the beat as the other left off.\footnote{Stearn, 2.}

The Savoy (1926-1958) wasn’t just any building, this particular ballroom was the soul of the neighborhood “personifying a community and an era.”\footnote{Englebrecht, 3.} The space itself was a monument to the music and dance of swing. In his poem Juke Box Love Song, Langston Hughes refers to the Savoy as “the Heartbeat of Harlem”. Opening on March 12, 1926, the Savoy was one of the largest ballrooms for music and public dancing spanning an entire block.\footnote{Thorpe, 87.} The establishment was financed by entrepreneur Jay Faggen and businessman Moe Gale.\footnote{Karen Hubbard and Terry Monaghan, Ballroom, Boogie, Shimmy Sham, Shake: A Social and Popular Dance Reader (Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P., 2009) 128.} However, it was the manager, Charles Buchanan, an African-American civic leader and businessman from the British West Indies, whose vision it was to run this luxury ballroom with the capacity to accommodate thousands of dancers at a reasonable price.\footnote{Ibid.} It became the primary destination for the Black
community during times of leisure even drawing out those from New Jersey and Connecticut. Open every night of the week and holding space for up to 4,000 people at a time, the Savoy was the perfect inclusive space for the black community to show off their dance moves.

Existing in a segregated society, the Savoy imagined what an unsegregated space could be like (which turned out to be a great business decision). Norma Miller, a frequent dancer at the Savoy turned professional, describes:

Black and white going in the doorway at the same time, dancing to the same place and that made it the most unusual place at that time. It was the only place that wasn’t segregated at that time… and it opened that way.

It contrasted the discriminatory values of other ballrooms and nightclubs like the Cotton Club or the Roseland Ballroom (1919-2014) which accommodated a white crowd even though the music was played by black entertainment (e.g. the Fletcher Henderson Band with Louis Armstrong) who entered through back doors or Small’s Paradise where it was the white clientele that kept the place open financially. The Savoy didn’t grasp at a white clientele even though many did come for the music and to copy black dancers that were inventing intricate new moves and perfecting their performance skills. The Savoy had a no-discrimination policy so the clientele was either 85% black and 25% white or there was a 50/50 split. The popularity of this venue amongst Black and white people

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111 Stern, 2.
112 Englebrecht, 5.
114 Englebrecht, 4-6.
115 Ibid.
116 Stern, 1.
can be attributed to its position as a community establishment. It meshed black musicians and dancer following a tradition where the two are directly correlated. Buchanan emphasized its existence as a place where “we could give the public two orchestras, a beautiful place and an opportunity of interpreting the rhythm of the drum and music that exists through the ages.” On top of that, the Savoy, always well populated, didn’t have to worry about attracting a crowd (Figure 4); the low admissions cost ensured that people showed up. Admission was 30¢ before 6pm, 60¢ before 8pm, and 85¢ after. Every night the Savoy was teeming with men and women in all kinds of clothing from simple evening wear to fur coats, shimmering dresses, and cutaway tailcoats. It was the dance place for all.

On the Dance Floor: Economic Opportunity and Contested Space

Dance as a Door for Economic Opportunity

Circling back to the idea that the Savoy was a great business decision is where I want to recognize that while for the community the Savoy was a revolutionary and exploratory space, for its owners it was more business that philanthropy. Faggen, Gale, and Buchanan each recognized the money that could amass from “providing an outlet for the mass social dance aspirations of the predominantly black local community.” The word “aspiration” is important because outside of the Savoy many Black dancers of Harlem had no grand space where they could express themselves and dance with others.

117 Englebrecht, 5.
118 Thorpe, 87-88.
119 Stern, 3.
120 Hubbard, 128.
However, even with this in mind, these three men had no idea what role dance, as opposed to music, would play in the Savoy’s economic existence. As new dances appeared and as Savoy dancers became known for their skill; the ballroom benefitted. With the United States entering the Great Depression (1929-1939), businesses that were to survive needed this kind of edge.

With that said, the Savoy as a space for social dancing also provided economic opportunity and brief fame to the best and most original young dancers. A dancer could get into Cat’s Corner, an area in the northeast corner with an unspoken rule that it was reserved for the best dancers, by displaying their individual artistry and finesse. The Savoy not only had an air of community but of competition.

![Image of Madeline and Freddie Lewis, Big Bea, Leroy “Stretch” Jones, Little Bea and Shorty George Snowden. They were the first generation of Lindy Hoppers.](http://harlemheritagelindyhopandswing.blogspot.com/2014/02/v-behaviorurldefaultvmlo.html)

Figure 2: From left to right: Madeline and Freddie Lewis, Big Bea, Leroy “Stretch” Jones, Little Bea and Shorty George Snowden. They were the first generation of Lindy Hoppers. Photo courtesy of Joel A. Freeman, Ph.D.: The Freeman Institute Foundation.
One Savoy dancer, sometimes credited for the creation of the Lindy Hop, George “Shorty” Snowden, built up enough celebrity for his dancing that he began a troupe that performed with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra at Paradise Club throughout the thirties (Figure 2)\(^{121}\) Additionally, from 1935 to 1943, Herbert “Whitey” White brought together and trained Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers (Figure 3), a group of Lindy Hoppers at the Savoy, opening them up to opportunities for stage and film work.\(^{122}\) Some of these dancers included Frankie “Musclehead” Manning, Al Minns, Norma Miller, Harry Rosenberg, and Ruthie Rheingold. Musclehead was known for dancing at

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\(^{121}\) According to Stern, as of 1927, one dance that all visitors of the Savoy would come to do was the Lindy Hop. The Lindy Hop got its name from a crowd of Black dancers in Harlem that broke out into dance celebrating American aviator Charles Lindbergh (1902-1974) after his “hop” across the Atlantic to Paris. At the Savoy’s Cat’s Corner, an area in the northeast corner with an unspoken rule that it was reserved for the best dancers, one could see the new and improved versions of the Lindy Hop and other dances of the time. Stern, 3.

\(^{122}\) Stern, 3.
an acute angle as if he were a track runner; this position equipped him to succeed at the
trickiest aerial steps. Al Minns was recognized for his high energy, “crazy leg” style while
Norma Miller dazzled with her combination of inventiveness, humor, and rhythm. The
previously mentioned dancers were all Black, but Whitey picked up all of the special
talent he saw pass through the Savoy. White individuals, Rosenberg and Rheingold were
paired as partners because of their incredible dance chemistry. All five of these dancers
continued to dance at the Savoy; a place of inspiration, creativity, and community.

The Dance Floor as Contested Space

![Image of dancers at the Savoy](https://www.pinterest.com/pin/33615155960121420/)

As an integrated ballroom, the Savoy began and continued to be a highly
contested space where popular creativity confronted ‘social control’.”

Even though its prices and management made it possible for racial and class groups to blur, the Savoy
was constantly negotiating the line between pushing boundaries and social acceptability.

To contextualize this, New Negroes critiqued the Savoy and other social dance spots for

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123 Hubbard, 127.
their compatibility with mainstream ideas of Black people and Black culture. Poet Langston Hughes distinctively suggests that the aerial style of the Lindy (an outgrowth of the floor style) was developed as a means to impress white audiences. He comments on the occasions when:

> The lindy-hoppers at the Savoy even began to practice acrobatic routines, and to do absurd things for the entertainment of the whites, that probably never would have entered their heads to attempt merely for their own effortless amusement. Some of the lindy-hoppers had cards printed with their names on them and became dance professors teaching their tourists. Then Harlem nights became show nights for the Nordics.\(^{124}\)

Langston Hughes and others were less concerned with the physical and mental boundaries being pushed by Black dancers who did aerial work as they were with the Black-white dichotomy in these social spaces. While Hughes shines a light on the difficult terrain that social dancers were walking. Were they exploring further dimensions of this dance style and influencing other people and cultures in the process? Or were they butchering and giving away some of the sacred dance traditions of the Black community? This question cannot be answered with anything other than they were simultaneously doing both. The social dancers at the Savoy chose to express, push, and enjoy themselves surrounded by community rather than accept and hide from the idea that anything produced by Black people would be read as an old stereotype in a new mask. This predicament continued to come about again and again as Black social dance transitions into American popular dance as we see with swing.

Additional challenges in the social dance scene appear as we look at other influences that had an effect on dancing at the Savoy. On the part of Savoy management, there were attempts made to uphold “appropriate” behavior as defined by societal norms making the dance floor a battleground for freedom of cultural expression. The bouncers, often ex-prize fighters or athletes, were tasked with ensuring that couples kept it moving on the dance floor. In the Savoy’s early years, they also kept an eye out for “permitted styles of dancing.” “Shorty” Snowden recounts when “fellow dancers had to calm down their exertions to an acceptable form of Shag or other medium-speed dances” because the bouncers were looking.\textsuperscript{125} In 1936, management even ventured to change Thursday “Kitchen Mechanics Night”, the most “risqué” night of the week into a communal minstrel song night where everyone danced the Cakewalk, waltz and quadrille.\textsuperscript{126,127} While these efforts were a failure, the Savoy did manage to make a waltz to “Home, Sweet Home” the final dance every night for 32 years.\textsuperscript{128} These standards enforced by the Savoy were in direct correlation with society’s judgement. This is to say that the rest of the world was not ready to accept the new territory being explored at the Savoy. Further reflecting on Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, the interracial dance troupe, I’ll note that Rosenberg and Rheingold were excluded from photo-ops and film performances; a restriction urged on by the press according to Frankie Manning.\textsuperscript{129} This is to say that

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[125] Stern, 6.
\item[126] Ibid.
\item[127] The Cakewalk is a dance created by enslaved people that caricatured the customs of white slaveholders. The quadrille is a square dance performed typically by four couples and containing five figures, each of which is a complete dance in itself.
\item[128] Stern, 6.
\item[129] Hubbard, 132.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
although the Savoy attempt to be a revolutionary space, it sometimes feels short when dealing with the reality of race relations in the United States.

Adding to this conversation, dancing at the Savoy threatened segregation, as a normalized practice, such that government and police alike attempted to divert people away from the place all together. Wary of a desegregated dance space, Norma Miller remembers a point when “cab drivers were told to ward white people off coming to Harlem.”

Miller’s testimony corresponds to the 1943, six-month, police-enforced closure of the Savoy that was instituted by Mayor LaGuardia on moral grounds. It was a bid to crack down on the “the sexually charged integration engendered on its premises” and to redirect the money of the Savoy’s considerable white clientele to downtown venues. The government had already played a hand in the relocation of the Cotton Club and popular Harlem eateries after the Harlem riots of 1935. All of this was a part of a long term effort to interrupt the influence of Harlem on New York, and the greater American culture. Given these circumstances, up until its closing on July 10, 1958 (Figure 5), the Savoy ballroom laid the groundwork for racial integration and advanced the cultural growth of Harlem’s Black community.

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130 Savoy Hop.
Figure 5: Commemorative plaque for the Savoy Ballroom unveiled in 2002 by Frankie Manning and Norma Miller. Photo retrieved from Flikr. https://www.flickr.com/photos/jag9889/6527842189

Conclusion

In summation, this chapter evaluates the Harlem Renaissance to uncover points of tension and intersection between embodied movement and social movement in the Black community. While this chapter read the Harlem Renaissance as a period of cultural, political, social, and artistic genius, it also reveals how a history of white objectification can impact collective opinion on social dancing in the example of the New Negroes and their devaluation of black popular entertainment. However, rather than marginalizing black social dance similarly to how Black people are marginalized every day, I find it critical to the culture of remembrance that we rethink this time period. I present the Savoy as a counter narrative arguing that this social dance space not
only shaped a Black aesthetic but forged community ties, had economic benefits, and tested out integration thereby envisioning a more equitable world. In my vision of Black social dance during the Harlem Renaissance, I suggest that this centralized and unapologetic expression of Black joy and talent marks another alternative version of Black identity and aesthetics; one that would influence the status of Black people for decades to come.
Chapter Three

The Manifestation of Black Power through Social Dance

While jumping from the Harlem Renaissance of chapter two to the Black Power Movement is an appropriate leap for the sake of this study, I would be depriving my readers of important context if I didn’t recap the decades passed. As a consequence of the Great Depression (1929-1939), the Harlem Renaissance saw its premature end in the mid-1930s. The economic downturn of the Depression years took a toll on much of Harlem’s Black community resulting in the closing of businesses and the departure of many of its residents. The peak of this financial situation occurred alongside the Harlem Riots of 1935, a result of police brutality and the unemployment crisis. After the riots, 125 people had been arrested, more than 100 people had been injured, and 3 individuals were dead, all of them black; 200 stores suffered property damage. While this marked the end of the Harlem Renaissance, the social impacts of this decade would continue to reverberate into future decades. Stepping out of the Great Depression and into the 1940s, U.S. citizens were migrating to the north, west, and Midwest and expressing a greater desire for a culture of leisure and consumerism. Even more concentrated in urban centers than in previous decades, African Americans were molding an urban identity through their social activities including shopping at chain stores, going to the movie theater, listening to the radio, and purchasing records, and as always dancing. Despite a transition from dance music to music for art, the Black community still used

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133 DeFrantz, *Dancing Many Drums*, 81.
134 Ibid.
the social dance arena to perform a new urban black identity. This references their exploration of new geographies and the accompanied mixing of classes, genders, and sexualities. DeFrantz refers to this new dance terrain as an embodiment of “awkwardness.”

The Slop, the Stoll and the Bus Stop (Black youth dances reminiscent of swing-era line dances) took over the 1950s following the new, rock ‘n’ roll influenced wave of expression; Black pop. Black pop and the social dance floors of the 50s explored the possibility of a new modern and integrated America. The 1960’s, most known for the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968), was a period that witnessed the rise of radical social movements in response to long existing debates over race, violence, war, democracy, and equality in America. Just as the Black community was demonstrating how influential they could be in the political sphere, the 60s also marked a peak in the influence of Black youth on American dance culture. There existed an optimistic, individualistic exploratory nature to the dance fads and freestyling of the 60s (e.g. Twist, Bop, Monkey, Madison, and Detroit Social) that appeared to have a connection to the economic security of the decade as well as the large scale sociopolitical changes that were happening.

Entering the mid-sixties and the seventies, social dancing moved away from the partner dances of previous decades and took on a more communal flavor. Not only that but it articulated an Afrocentric identity analogous to the popular aesthetic formed out of the Black Power movement. So what was the Black Power movement and how did it permeate the dancing world?

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135 DeFrantz, Dancing Many Drums, 81.
137 Ibid, 188.
The Black Power Movement (1965-1985)

The late 60s and 70s in the United States shaped notions of transgression as people organized against injustice in a manner not previously seen. Unlike the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights movement that built their stances on American democratic tradition, the Black Power movement enacted blackness as a liberatory tactic so much that it emerged as “a placeholder for radicality.”138 “Black Power” as defined by this movement rose in the final years of the Civil Rights movement when many in the Black community were doubting non-violent resistance as the best direct-action tactic in the fight against injustice. In June 1966, after being arrested during a march in Greenwood Mississippi, Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks of the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee (SNCC) called for “Black Power,” a stark contrast to the typical “Freedom Now” chant of the Civil Rights Movement.139 Both Ricks and Carmichael wanted something beyond the legislative change that resulted from the Civil Rights Movement; they wanted cultural self-determination and economic independence. They wanted a recapturing of Black heritage and Black identity. While the Black Power Movement encompassed numerous groups, people, and ideologies, studies of this social movement have divided it into two overarching sectors: political nationalists and cultural nationalists.

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<th>Political Nationalists</th>
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<td>Goals</td>
<td>Political nationalists sought to fill the gaps that the Civil Rights Movement had left by political means, however, there were two varying perspectives on what that would require. “Community political nationalists” believed that control of Black communities and institutions needed to be put in the hands of Black people. “Separatist political nationalists” worked to “institutionalize the physical separateness between white and black America that community nationalism simply accepted as a practical reality.”</td>
<td>Cultural nationalists aimed to create racial solidarity and pride through the reclamation of a Black past and the recreation of a Black aesthetic. William Van DeBurg best describes cultural nationalists when he said that “Black Power is best understood as a broad, adaptive, cultural term…. [and] viewing the movement through the window of culture allows us to see that language, folk culture, religion, and the literary and performing arts served to spread the militants’ philosophy much faster than did mimeographed political broadsides.”</td>
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Through the Window of culture: The Aesthetic of Black Power

Black culture as a tool for Black liberation manifested itself in a variety of ways during the Black Power Movement. Some in the Black community took on African and/or Muslim names or added African proverbs to their speeches. Others joined Marcus Garvey’s “Back to Africa” campaign. While another group of cultural nationalists

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142 Marcus Garvey’s “Back to Africa” was the result of his separate but equal ideology. He maintained that Black people did not belong in America as the white man would never relinquish
reinvested themselves in art that embodied a Black aesthetic. DeFrantz identifies this occurrence as “the emphatic proclamation of an oppressed people’s psychological reorientation.”\textsuperscript{143} This focus on cultural identity production is part of the resignification process that the Black community has historically effectuated. Johnson actually would argue that this “mutual constructing/ destructing, avowing/ disavowing, and expanding/ delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of blackness is the very thing that constitutes ‘black culture.’”\textsuperscript{144} Emerging within this framework, the Black Arts Movement (1965-1976), a sub-movement to Black Power that primarily engaged with visual art, poetry, theater, music, and literature, began with the opening of the Black Arts Repertory Theater in Harlem in the spring of 1964 by poet Imamu Amiri Baraka (previously known as Leroi Jones) (1934-2014).\textsuperscript{145} The theater presented concerts, plays, and poetry readings to the Harlem community taking on topics such the racist formation of Black identity in America, the illusion of American body politics, and the war on poverty.\textsuperscript{146} Although the theater closed due to a loss of funding, a result of their radical opinions, and internal issues, their impact on the Black community had already taken place. Black Arts groups appeared around the country in California, New Orleans, Washington D.C., Detroit, Philadelphia, and New Jersey.\textsuperscript{147} After the Watts rebellion, activist Maulana Karenga (b.1941) established the cultural ideology of the Black Arts Movement as he believed that

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item DeFrantz, \textit{Dancing Many Drums}, 6.
\item Patrick E. Johnson, \textit{Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity} (Durham [N.C.]: Duke UP, 2003) 19
\item Addison Gayle, \textit{The Black Aesthetic} (Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Books, 1972) 278.
\item Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
culture would be the factor that if reclaimed could allow for the autonomy of the Black community. Karenga’s seven principles for culture included:

1. Mythology
2. History
3. Social Organization
4. Political Organization
5. Economic Organization
6. Creative Motif
7. Ethos

These seven principals and the emergence of Black Arts groups around the nation spoke directly to Black America during this critical point in the late 60s presenting a radical alternative to existing notions of Blackness, one that was inspired by, about, and for Black people. Confronting many of the same questions people of the Harlem Renaissance did but informed by the politically and socially charged environment of the 60s & 70s, the Black Arts Movement clarified three main criteria that would define the Black Aesthetic of this time period.

Criteria of the Black Arts Movement:

1. It must support the revolution.
2. It must be collective.

The Black Arts movement valued intensive community engagement with respects to art production and art participation. Creating work that was collective meant that the collective comes before the individual. They defined individual as “me in spite of everyone”. Instead they encouraged a freedom of art and expression that was conscious of its effects of the community; a “me in relation to everyone.”

3. It must commit us to the past, present, and most importantly the future that is ours; to revolution and change.

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148 Maulana Karenga is also the creator of the African American holiday Kwanzaa. Gayle, 278.
149 Gayle, 278.
Each of these criteria emphasize a community-oriented identity. It made it the job of the artist to speak to cultural/spiritual needs of Black people. The collective energy of the Black Power Era ushered in “the decade of us.” With these three criteria, the Black Arts Movement and cultural nationalists would transform struggles for racial justice by honing in the community on a common objective: the formation of a Black aesthetic. This aesthetic, then registered in all social environments, took on a particularly interesting form in social dance and music.

The Decade of Us: Black Power Fosters a New Wave of Social Dance, Music, and Fashion

If the music of the Negro in America, in all its permutations, is subjected to a socioanthropological as well as a musical scrutiny, something about the essential nature of the Negro’s existence in this country ought to be revealed, as well as something about the essential nature of this country, that is, society as a whole.

A culture with all the intricacies that implies was formed around Black Power and its aesthetic principles. With regards to music and dance of the mid-sixties and seventies, they were geared towards social message and emotion and away from the instruction dance songs of the early sixties which had lost most of its significance to

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Larry Neal, a scholar known for his contributions to the Black Arts Movement, expressed that Black Power is a synthesis of all of the nationalistic ideas embedded within the double-consciousness of Black America. But it has no one specific meaning. It is rather a kind of feeling—a kind of emotional response to one’s history. Neal is defining a Black aesthetic, as understood in the 70s, in which all creative energy emerges in relationship to our past and our stories; to a genealogy of Black existence.

Exploring Black music in particular, Neal’s view is that:

Our music is something else. The best of it has always operated at the core of our lives, forcing itself upon us as in a ritual. It has always, somehow, represented the collective psyche.

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153 Although by the mid-sixties dance instruction songs turned into over-produced popular music, dance instruction songs have an interesting history with relation to Black aesthetic formation. This genre of music harks back to West African dance in which the musician will often cue dancers through the drums on when to transition from one movement to the next. It also has links to the instructions that enslaved musicians would give during slave gatherings and white plantation balls and to Black folk song, game, and dance tradition. Dance instruction songs that come out of the Black community follow the African American oral tradition in that the instructions are “called” and the dancers “respond”; the dance developing as the song continues. The dance notation found in the lyrics are encoded with quantitative (size, body part, direction, time) & qualitative (energy level) meaning such that the music itself becomes another body with which the dancers are interacting. Many instruction songs and their dances make references to African American culture and history adding to the formation of an esoteric Black aesthetic and identity that was occurring outside of the dance space. The pedagogical function of instruction songs often encouraged movement quality that was aligned more with Black aesthetics than normative Western dance steps. Some examples are “mashed potatoes”, “ride your pony”, “walk like a duck”, and “walk pigeon-toed.” The 60s marked a peak in dance instruction songs but we also saw smaller peaks in the 1920s and 1940s; each being a point of heightened racial consciousness. Dance instruction songs and the public spaces where they were danced in evaded the white resistance that was experienced in other social and political spaces. Black social dance instruction songs spread from the Black community to American mainstream culture and even to international dance spaces. As white America embodied the Black cultural codes that came with doing instruction song dance, they were engaging in the Africanization of American culture; this permitted a “temporary resolution of racial conflict to take place on a deeply embodied cultural level” (Sally Banes and John F. Szwed).


155 Ibid.
Informed by Neal’s ideas, soul music of the seventies is one genre that especially captured the aura of the Black Power. “Soul”, a word with definite religious undertones, was an essential element of Blackness but it required one to not just be Black but act Black. The performance of Blackness that was “soul” incorporated a sense of coolness that could be used to reference a person, food, and of course music. Soul music, originating in the 1950s and early 1960s in the U.S., connects word, sound, and meaning in a way that is culturally distinct. Although he specifically speaks of Black poetry, professor of Afro-American studies Stephen Henderson would call soul music’s loyalty to the Black experience “saturation.” This theory measures blackness in a way that is “both focused and flexible in its configurations of racial experience, meaning, and consciousness.” It fits the subject, in this case soul music, into the political and social demands of the Black aesthetic. Having thought through the links between music and dance in Black cultural expression, I want to articulate the means by which the “saturation” quality of soul music transferred into the social dances. Dancing to soul music realizes a “rhythmic legibility and cultural responsibility” that is unique to Black social dancing. It transcends the objective reality of being a Black person in America and enters into another dimension that engages with issues of Blackness on a personal and incessant level.

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157 Baraka, 104.
We Got the Funk: Funk Music, Funky Dancing, and the Black Community

As a genre of music, funk appeared in the mid-1960s splintering off from soul music. However, the word funk like many others found its full meaning when it was repurposed in Black American English.\(^{159}\) Funk carries multiple meaning at once according to Geneva Smitherman’s *Black Talk*. It is defined as (1) the musical sound of jazz, blues, work songs, rhythm and blues, and African American music generally; (2) the quality of being soulful, funky; (3) a bad smell; an unpleasant odor, and (4) a euphemism for *fuck*, in its sexual meaning.\(^{160}\) When uttered, the word “funk” insinuates both good and bad. It echoes the points of distress and success that are at the core of the Black experience in America. Later in the sixties, when it would come to describe a genre of music, funk would reveal this multifarious nature in the grit of its layered sounds. James Brown (1933-2006) who had started as a 1950s R&B singer and then transitioned into the soul genre in the 60s was one of the first to imagine the funk style.\(^{161}\) In his song “Cold Sweat” (1968), James Brown “turned the whole band into a drum” so that “every element in there [was] just kicking.”\(^{162}\) In this song, there was the inception of funk music. Known for its intensity and groove, the funk energy was driven by the base and drum lock. It combined elements of jazz, pop, rock, gospel, R&B, and soul so that funk was “in essence, togetherness in motion.”\(^{163}\) “Togetherness in motion” speaks to the...

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159 Define Black American English (also known as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is a dialect of English.
162 “The Story of Funk: One Nation Under a Groove.”
capacity for song and dance to improve “communication ability and societal cohesion” and establish an “emotional solidarity” through rhythm. During the Black Power Era, this would’ve added another affective layer to the community building being implemented. Unlike its predecessors, R&B and Soul, Funk music emphasizes the 1 beat and not 2 and 4. This driving beat along with its messages of Black empowerment stirred the soul of both Black America and mainstream America. Songs like James Brown’s “Say It Loud, I’m Black & I’m Proud” (1968) functioned as a protest anthem just as Sly and the Family Stone’s “Everyday People” (1968) became the song of unity. Sly and the Family Stone, another group that shaped the funk sound, was a mixed race, mixed gender group in which the musicians were singers and singers were musicians. Everyone in the group was central to the performance group which showed America that integration could work and which created a space where member Larry Graham felt bold enough to invent the slap-base element of funk music. Not only that but Sly and the Family Stone (Figure 6) also established the eclectic funk fashion that would define the 70s.

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164 Iso note that an emphasis on the 1 beat is an African tradition and rhythm that is known for stirring the soul. “The Story of Funk: One Nation Under a Groove.”
165 “The Story of Funk: One Nation Under a Groove.”
166 Slap bass is a percussive sound produced on a bass guitar by bouncing strings against the fretboard. “The Story of Funk: One Nation Under a Groove.”
Funk music and the eccentric acts it has produced came about during a point of self-discovery and social change for the Black community. Funk changed the Black communities vision of self when it introduced experimental music, outrageous fashion, groovy dances and space-age visions to the arena. It provided a platform for a new lifestyle and a new philosophy that could ignite a sense of pride in a united young Black Americans. Now I turn to another funky group, Parliament Funkadelic (1968- ), who profoundly combines Black politics, philosophy, and dance in a manner emblematic of 70’s social movement and cultural expression.

P-Funk: Grooving through Black Power

Groups like Parliament Funk (P-Funk) proved that funk music was undeniably a genre for Black artists to theorize their blackness. Brought together as a doo-wop band by George Clinton, a songwriter from North Carolina, P-Funk was a group that saw

themselves as more than just music. Finding funk to be a more suitable outlet for the group’s personality and outlook on life, P-Funk’s heavy groove and cosmic performance funk style was heavily influenced by their social and economic upbringing in working-class southern Black communities. However, it would be their time in Detroit that showed them how deep America’s failures run. In Detroit, the Black community experienced:

deindustrialization (layoffs due to automated machines & closing of big factories—related to WWII), ghettoization of inner city due to white flight, poor housing due to neglect from city funding and maintenance, few job prospects, birth of counterculture, escalation of Vietnam War, urban riots & rebellions, rise of black power.

P-Funks sound and lyrics took on a radical edge in response to their world view. In their music, they presented messages of freedom and liberation rooted in African American tradition. In their song “Music for my Mother” (1969), P-Funk ends with the line “Say it Loud, I’m Funk and I’m Proud”; a reference to James Brown’s original “I’m Black and I’m Proud” line. The substitution of Black with Funk promoted black pride but also identified funk as an explicitly black genre. Their cultural critic of American policy, both domestic and foreign continued in “If You Don’t Like the Effect, Don’t Produce the Cause” (1972), “Wake Up” (1972), and “We Hurt Too” (1972). In their song “Chocolate City” (1975), P-Funk talks about the increasing agency and power of Blacks in the political landscape of Washington D.C. and other major municipalities. The chorus goes “Gainin on ya! We’re gainin on ya!” These lines discuss the growing

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168 Bolden, 35.
169 Bolden, 36.
momentum of Black influence in America while using Ebonics so that every member of
the Black community could imagine themselves as part of this growing political success.

Once we did Chocolate City—putting black people in situations they have never been in, and it
worked—I knew I had to find another place for black people to be. And space was that place.¹⁷⁰

One of their biggest albums, “Mothership Connection” (1975) marked the start of
P-Funk’s philosophy and cosmology. They adopted the myth of the origin of funk into
every aspect of the group. The myth goes that funk has its origins in the Egyptian
pyramids of African civilizations but had been lost to man because of misuse.¹⁷¹ Through
P-Funk, funk music was an expression of these post-African values. Every lyric, album
cover, and concert would resemble a religious experience transporting their fans to
untraditional, afrofuturistic spaces.¹⁷²

One could conceive of their work as folklore, and perhaps some of the first post-industrial black
American mythology.¹⁷³

P-Funk performances were a community affair. The band engaged in call and
response chants with the audience while also producing beats that would keep the crowd
dancing.¹⁷⁴ According to Clinton, the funk grooves were nothing less than a means of
arriving at a spiritual focus while also proving bodily release to an afflicted audience.¹⁷⁵

The unity of the dance is given unto the dancers... it is not their responsibility to keep in step,
but their privilege to have “The One” channeled through the band’s antennae and onto the

¹⁷¹ Bolden, 42–3.
¹⁷² Afrofuturism is a Black cultural aesthetic that reimagines African tradition as it would intersect
with technology and all things futuristic.
¹⁷³ Vincent, 256.
¹⁷⁴ Bolden, 46.
¹⁷⁵ Anne Danielsen, Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament
dance floor. Even if you have no intention of dancing, your protons are going to go ahead without you. It can’t be helped.\textsuperscript{176}

P-Funk would move their audience for what felt like a lifetime facilitating a massive dance party. You could go to a P-Funk concert and think that it was one song continuously playing for 3-4 hours.\textsuperscript{177} This was intentional on the bands part as dance was considered a critical element of their movement. From “Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow” (1970) to “One Nation Under a Groove” (1978), their lyrics encouraged audience members to move in resistance to all that is un-funky in the world and to reconnect with mother nature. The nonstop music and dance were described by Ron Scribner, Funkadelic manager:

\begin{quote}
That was my first experience in terms of the tribalness of how they connected to people. From when they started to when they finished, there seemed to be something hypnotic about what happened that night. It was as if the group and the audience went into almost a trance in terms of the dancing, the singing, the counter-singing to their music, the chanting along with it. Funkadelic provided an atmosphere of freedom and incessant rhythm that encouraged communal dance.\textsuperscript{178}
\end{quote}

Dancing to P-Funk’s music was a transcendent experience. It allowed for Black people to transcend their problems and embody a new space. Clinton suggested to his audiences that “funk provided them with a way out of their ‘constrictions,’” and by “pay[ing] allegiance to the funk” they could be apart of this new mythical nation.\textsuperscript{179} The music and dance of funk was the music and dance of Black liberation. Funk music was at the center

\textsuperscript{177} “The Story of Funk: One Nation Under a Groove.”
\textsuperscript{178} Marsh.
\textsuperscript{179} Bolden, 47.
of the cultural shift occurring in the 70s and its expansion of Black imagination contributed to the formation of Black identity during this decade.

The Hippest Trip in America: Soul Train

Figure 7: Image of two dancers in bright-colored jumpsuits coming down the Soul Train line as others sporting their own unique outfits watch. Photo by Rio On The Radio

Historically tied to the seventies, Soul Train (1971-2006) was an entertainment and music driven program that publicized the black sphere for all of America. The program’s creator, Don Cornelius, was a Chicagoan news reader and deejay with a prior career in broadcasting. He pitched the idea of a Black American Bandstand to WCIU-TV, a local UHF station, and by October of 1971 Soul Train was debuted. Upon its initiation, Soul Train began to carve out a space for the Black community in a

181 American Bandstand (1952-1989) was a music-performance show hosted by Dick Clark that featured the latest music hits(according to white America) for teens to dance to. Lehman, 14.
society that had adopted television, and leisure, as an essential component of life. The show would grow to be an American cultural institution featuring politics, music, and dance that centered the Black community.

When first pitching the title for the program to buyer, Cornelius explained that: “Soul is soul. We’ll just put the word ‘train’ after it.” He followed this up by saying that the viewers would understand what this meant. While he wasn’t able to convince these initial buyers, Don Cornelius was correct in saying that the word “soul” would be recognized by Black T.V. viewers. During the 70s, “soul” referenced a “coolness”; an “Afrocentricity”. In the music industry “soul” was so popularly used in song titles that it became the go to label for the type of music produced by Black artists of the day (e.g. “Woman’s Got Soul” by The Impressions (1965). The term also appeared in the political arena. In the summer of 1968 at a demonstration for the Poor People’s Campaign, Reverend Jesse Jackson (b.1941) of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (est.1957) changed the famous slogan “Black Power” to “Soul Power”. Soul was the new Black. Don Cornelius understood the gravity of this word when he established the premise, the identity, of Soul Train. The show showcased “‘real’ black people, representing the common man and woman -- doing the latest dances and wearing the hippest clothes and sporting those fly hairdos.” An example of the diversity in style can be seen in Figures 8. Soul Train was described as:

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182 Lehman, 19.
183 Lehman, 20.
184 Lehman, 20.
185 The Poor People's Campaign, or Poor People's March on Washington, was a 1968 effort to gain economic justice for poor people in the United States. (put in different words). Lehman, 21.
your only sources for what the latest dances were, so you pretty much had to use your memory to memorize everything or you had to wait a whole week and hope that they did that same move again."  

Soul Train was connecting the Black social sphere across states and Don Cornelius was nothing if not particular in this image that he crafted. *Soul Train* was set up so that the only way to get onto the show after the first episode was to be recommended by a regular dancer on the show. Like many Black social dance spaces, it would be a network made up of strong social ties. According to Cornelius, “People who dance well, dress well, are well groomed and know how to behave seem to know others who dance, dress and behave well.” He had succeeded in fashioning the image of a talented, well-mannered, and dazzling Black community.

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Figure 8: A photo taken of some of Soul Train’s fashionable dancers. Photo retrieved from google photos.

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187 “Soul Train: The Hippest Trip in America.”
188 “Soul Train: The Hippest Trip in America.”
However, the glamorized version of Blackness presented on the show was not always a reality. Dancer, Marco De Santiago recalled a time when he was spotted by *Soul Train* fans with:

*You have no idea; I am a month behind on rent because I bought a suit to wear to Soul Train. I want to ask you for $25 but I'll sign your autograph.*

In addition to the economic struggles faced by those on the show, Black dancers and Black viewers alike also had to deal with the reality outside of *Soul Train* where America was still fighting over segregation and Black soldiers returning from Vietnam still had to deal with the daily inequities of being Black in America. With this sociopolitical backdrop, Don Cornelius and *Soul Train* was even more determined to make an impact both through internal and external community building. Through music and dance, *Soul Train* performed an unapologetic Blackness that while geared towards Black America would impact the entire nation. The first level in which the high school and college students featured on this show impacted America was in the realm of fashion and dance.

To the untuned-in observer it is audio visual anarchy- every dance style from Golliwog’s Cakewalk to Martha Graham. Ballet. Acrobatics. Eccentric. Jitterbug. Bugaloo. But most identifiable Free-style Soul. That is until Pam Brown (Soul Train Dance Leader) points out couples doing the robot, the Manikin, the Breakdown- three of the fad dances that have originated on the show. Dress and hairstyles were even more profuse. Bells, cuffs and tights. Tank tops, turtlenecks, ruffles. Jeans, knickers, minis, maxis. Bow ties, scarves, steals, chains and chokers. Unisex earrings and bracelets. Clogs, platforms, Adidas. Afros, cornrows, skinheads and pigtails. Sequined matadors, Straightarrow Harold Teens. Gatsbys, Po’ Boys. Sportin’ Lifes, American Graffiti, Rita Hayworths and Billie Holidays. Clothes out of the ’20s, ’30s, ’40s, ’50s, and ’70s.

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190 “Soul Train: The Hippest Trip in America.”
Soul Train was dynamic in its presentation of Black style and aesthetics. Presented in one space it forged a collective, but not homogeneous, Black identity— one defined by pushing the boundaries of fashion and movement; “me in relation to everyone”. Taking on a bigger challenge, the show would also find a way to meld creative expression with political activism. Soul Train spotlighted the music of Black artists, including many who had political messages to communicate. In one Soul Train episode, James Brown performed his song “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” in a form that followed traditional call and response fashion. He said “Soul Train… Say it Loud” and dancers responded with “I’m Black and I’m Proud.”

Soul Train was a crucial black space; and optimizing on its influential capacity, Don Cornelius added other elements to the show to make it a fully Black experience. One example was the promotion of “Black is Beautiful” through ads featuring Black natural hair products such as Johnson Products Ultra Sheen. Another example was the Scramble Board. The Scramble Board was a game where two “random” dancers would be tasked with unscrambling letters that would spell the name of legendary Black figures (e.g. Phyllis Wheatley, Harriet Tubman, Julian Bond). Commenting on this segment of the show, Cornelius said that “it was impossible not to win because they wanted to project positive images of Black people so “we couldn’t have them stand there misspelling Stevie Wonder's name.”

Don Cornelius had created a communal space for dance, music, and entertainment that had

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92 “Soul Train: The Hippest Trip in America.”
93 “Black is Beautiful” was a cultural campaign to combat against the racist idea that the natural features of Black people are lesser than that of others. It encouraged the Black community to wear their hair natural, to not bleach their skin, and to take pride in their natural features. “Soul Train: The Hippest Trip in America.”
94 “Soul Train: The Hippest Trip in America.”
95 “Soul Train: The Hippest Trip in America.”
political ramifications and would be televised across the country. Always changing with the times, and more importantly the people, *Soul Train* brought new waves of dances (e.g. Popping, Ticking, Waacking, Robot) and music (e.g. Disco and Hip Hop) to its viewers up until its final showing on March 25, 2006.¹⁹⁶ *Soul Train* as a social space was the physical culmination of Black Power. It marked the decade of us.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I considered the shift to a more urgent and purposeful Black aesthetic and social dance scene that occurred during The Black Power Movement. Known for its radicalism, The Black Power Movement produced aesthetic sensibilities shaped around ideas of resistance (of white beauty standards and domination), of racial pride and of collectivity. The social dance sphere during this time period reaffirmed, nurtured, reflected back, and popularized the Black aesthetic to the point where its influence on Black culture and American culture was undeniable. Chapter three allowed me to explore the Funk genre and its corresponding dance scene as a driving force for liberation with a focus on Parliament Funk and their concerts. This chapter also featured a section on the syndicated program *Soul Train* where dance and Afrocentricity were one in the same to be televised for viewer’s absorption. Social dance during the Black Power Movement was not a social space influenced by political objectives but rather a constantly mobilizing political space in and of itself.

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¹⁹⁶ “Soul Train: The Hippest Trip in America.”
PHRASE III: PRACTICE
Chapter Four

Exploring the Black Aesthetic as Embodied Research

Historical Analysis and Practice

Having effectively established the historical foundations of the Black dance and the Black aesthetic within American social movements, the next portion of this thesis, as a component of the Dance major, will merge historical analysis and practice in a reflection on my two-part choreographic installation, *only we know* (2017) and *Say It Loud!* (2018). In this exploration of movement as research, I take on a more informal voice as it lends itself more to the personalized experience of the body in motion. Situating my choreographic process within the context of the previous chapters, I will highlight the overlaps between my aforementioned research and the rehearsal space.

In Chapter 1, I navigated the manifestation of identity and the process by which individuals come to identify and be identified as part of a group. From the historically specific creation of racial monikers to the construction of Black culture and cultural expressions, namely dance, in response to social movement and identity formation, Chapter 1 pinpointed the particularities of what I call the Black aesthetic. Chapter 2 approached my first case study, the Harlem Renaissance, articulating the contributions of dance to the reimagining of the Black aesthetic within the context of a movement spurred on by intellectual, artistic, and sociopolitical upheaval and characterized by notions of creativity and collectivity. In this section the Black social dance sphere acts as a space for establishing community ties, an opportunity for financial advancement, and a test subject for racial integration. Chapter 3 delved into a second case study, the Black
Power Movement, marking out the relationship between the new wave of social dance and dance spaces and the emergence of Black pride, Black is beautiful, and other social campaigns for Black liberation. In this chapter, the Black aesthetic established stability and community bonds in a time period marked by instability and struggle. Each of these chapters while accenting the cultural face of Black social movements and illustrating the specificities of a Black aesthetic, still felt insufficient in reaching a deeper understanding of Black dance and the Black aesthetic. With this sentiment, I returned to one of the five premises for conceptualizing dance: “Movement knowledge is intertwined with other kinds of cultural knowledge.” I asked myself: what would it mean for me to not just tell this story but to live this story? Answering my own question, I spent my senior year navigating Black social dance in the studio and physicalizing the Black aesthetic as a necessary step in bridging the gap between scholarship and practice. As an entrance point to my choreographic process, I will share my inspirations outside of the research compiled in the previous three chapters. I will then reflect on my process both in and out of the rehearsal space, incorporating details about the conception, the building of a dance, creative elements outside of movement, and the final product, all the while highlighting threads between the written thesis and the performance thesis. As you continue, I ask readers to reflect on my choreographic work not as revealing a profound truth but as an attempt to creatively reflect on my own perspective and access point into Black dance and aesthetics.

197 Skylar.
Before honing in on my creative process, I want to acknowledge some of my contemporaries that informed my work, notably Reggie Wilson and Camille A. Brown. Two different artists from different generations, both Reggie Wilson and Camille Brown are interested in what it means to be of the African diaspora. In their work they speak to the situation of Black people today or in the past, telling deeply personal stories as well as universal stories. These two artists have mapped out a road for my choreographic inquiry into Black social dance and aesthetics; roads which I have both travelled and from which I have diverged.

Reggie Wilson (b. 1967)

During the summer of 2018, I had the opportunity to intern with Brooklyn-based, Southern-raised choreographer Reggie Wilson as a part of Wesleyan’s DanceLink Fellowship. Through this experience, I took the journey of Reggie's life from his birth in 1967 to his upbringing in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. I learned about Reggie’s formative years in the church and the different art forms which he would experience as part of the Gifted and Talented programs that they tested out on Black kids of the 80s. A similar program to the ones I was introduced to throughout elementary and middle school. Reggie detailed to me his introduction to dance through musical theater and his first experience with modern dance during the summer between his junior and senior year in high school. A program that was transformative for Reggie, showing him the possibilities of manifesting the drama of musical theater in a form that was more
kinesthetic. I learned about Reggie’s interest in diasporic people, lineage, migration, multiculturalfism, and how we come to embody our complex identities and the identities of those we come in contact with. In conjunction with his company Reggie Wilson: Fist and Heels Performance Group (est. 1989), Reggie employs dance to “create, research, develop, and present new performance work that investigates the intersections of culture and movement practices…. drawing from the spiritual and mundane traditions of Africa and its Diaspora.”

His anthropological view on dance contributed to his self-titled movement style “post-African/Neo-HooDoo Modern dances.” His play on words strings together seemingly different identities and movement bases which he follows up with questions such as: What is Postmodern dance? African diasporic dance? If there is such a thing as Post Africa? And then where does Hoodoo, the religious tradition of Benin that inspired Voodoo in New Orleans and the religious practices of the diaspora such as Voodoo come into play? This line of questioning that Reggie prompts contributes to his dedication to dance and “the body as a valid means of knowing.” Having spent time with Reggie and having gone through the archives of his work, I absorbed many of his inquiries and made them my own. I grasped on to the questions of “how do we lead

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198 The name derived from enslaved Africans in the Americas who reinvented their spiritual traditions as a soulful art form that both white and black authorities dismissed as merely “fist and heel worshipping”. http://www.fistandheelperformancegroup.org/#/whoisfistandheel/.
199 For more information on how Reggie Wilson developed his signature choreographic style, read his interview with dance historian Susan Manning at https://muse-jhu-edu.ezproxy.wesleyan.edu/article/575980.
and why we follow?” which he proposed in his 2013 work Moses(es). My interest was further peaked by the central questions of his work Citizen (2016):


Reggie’s approach to these questions of belonging on a kinesthetic, personal and macro level impacted how I undertake questions of inclusion, support, and community building. But far greater was his influence on my perspective on my final dance creations. During my time with the company, Reggie was never concerned with what people understood or didn’t understand about his work or his style because he believed in the unfixed nature of identity and all other labels. This outlook is one that I carried with me into the creation of both my fall and spring works.

Camille A. Brown (b. 1979)

Look inside a community and you will see the movement of the people - through gesture, dance, music, etc.

While I have not had the privilege of working with dancer and choreographer Camille A. Brown, I have tracked her work since she and her company performed at Wesleyan University in 2016. Founded in 2006, Camille A. Brown and Dancers engages with “the excavation of ancestral stories” drawing on the aesthetics of African, Hip Hop,
Modern, Ballet, and Tap movement vocabulary in their embodiment of gestural vocabulary, personal experiences, and cultural narratives. She is currently in the midst of a trilogy that explores identity through dance and theatricality. Part one, Mr. TOL E. RANCE (2012), celebrates African American humor and “examines ‘the mask’ of survival and the ‘double-consciousness’ of the black performer throughout history and the stereotypical roles dominating current popular Black culture.” This piece draws inspiration from Mel Watkin’s “On The Real Side: From Slavery to Chris Rock”, Spike Lee’s “Bamboozled”, and Dave Chappelle’s “dancing vs. shuffling” analogy. Part two, BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play (2015) taps into the identity of black females in urban American culture as it is self-defined and defined by others. This piece explores the complex range of narratives regarding black womanhood from child to adult in a world dominated by politics and race. In this work, Camille uses the rhythms of African-American social forms (dance, tap, Juba, double-dutch, ring shout, and gestures of black women to tell this story of identity. The final part of this trilogy, ink (2017), which I am just discovering rings most closely to the work that I am trying to do in my embodied research. Camille explores Black culture of the African diaspora celebrating the traditions, music, and social vocabulary of this history and showcasing the power of community ties. I am most inspired by the authenticity of movement vocabulary and the vulnerability of individuals within Camille A. Brown’s work. Additionally, her

206 Camille A. Brown.
207 Ibid.
208 Ibid.
209 Ibid.
210 Ibid.
molding of everyday gestures in to dance makes her work both accessible and naturally tied to African tradition. Like Camille A. Brown, I aim for my dancers to feel like people that we have all met with stories that we might have experienced. I aim for a quality of cultural continuity, however as you will see my path towards that looks slightly different.

**My Body, My Culture, My Practice**

My choreographic influences in addition to my research from Chapters 1-3 provided the resources for my movement-based investigation of Black dance and the Black aesthetic. In my first attempt, *only we know* (2017), I aimed to tell the story of Black women dancing. This story explores themes of the female body and hypersexualization, the double consciousness of being Black in America, celebration, sorrow, safe spaces and the building of community as experienced on the dance floor. In my movement journey I worked to incorporate an emotional trajectory in which feeling of playfulness and joy, anger and discomfort, hope and resiliency were explored. In my second installation, *Say It Loud!* (2018), I followed a different character-based story in which four Black individuals of different time periods come together (Figure 12) to explore and embody the memories of their body and of our history. I challenged myself to see if a sense of belonging could transcend temporal difference. As I will describe in the coming section, each of these works, made in collaboration with my dancers, drew heavily from a variety of Black social dances, presented challenges of authenticity, and generated spaces for individual and group reflection on questions of Black identity, aesthetics, dance, and community.
Conception of the work

Central to the conception of *only we know* was a TEDx talk given by Camille A. Brown on “The History of African American Social Dance.”\(^{211}\) In the course of the talk Camille explores Black social dances from the Transatlantic slave trade to today as the keepings of African tradition and the affirmation of Black identity and independence. She implores viewers to find out what happens when “communities let loose and express themselves by dancing together.”\(^{212}\) From her experience she found that social dance is

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\(^{212}\) Brown, “A visual history of social dance in 25 moves.”
“part structure and part individual creativity” and that it “supports your identity.” In her exploration of the cultural narrative of Black identity, Camille A. Brown brings attention to the intersection between one body and the group body, individual identity and the identity of a community, social networks, social movements, and the physical expression of these processes. This talk became a recurring thought for me and I responded in the only ways I know how, dance.

Finding Movers:

The task of choosing dancers for *only we know* was informed by my dance background and my desire to dance the memories of my blood. I had the opportunity to take all forms of dance growing up but it was the rhythmic quality of hip hop and tap dance that intrigued me. When I came to Wesleyan and began to sculpt my movement style, I realized that the rhythmic, percussive sounds that I loved were the same sounds my mother listened to as a child and that my grandmother enjoyed in her youth; it was the sound of Black communities around the world. This Black musical aesthetic is part of my identity and I wanted others who felt a similar connection to the music and the beat. In the search for dancers, I found it challenging to find individuals who both identified as Black and encompassed the physicality and musicality which I was looking for. Ultimately, I chose three dancers: SeArah Smith, Makari Chung, and myself (see example Figure 9). While I had never worked with SeArah or Makari, I chose them because of the interesting relationship between our similar upbringings as Black women from Brooklyn, NY paired with the diversity of our movement quality. Makari’s

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213 Brown, “A visual history of social dance in 25 moves.”
movement is centralized in a strong core whereas ScArah movement quality is marked by her dynamic energy changes. I on the other hand optimize gestures and use my limbs to convey an emotional arc while dancing. (See example Figure 10) With that said, as a trio we forged a kinesthetic bond that could also be called community. Each of us contributed a distinct take on percussion and improvisation that was necessary for exploring social dance. As a collective, we possessed a clarity yet unpredictability that excited my choreographic eye.

Figure 10: A photo of me dancing to “Forward” by Beyonce during the dress rehearsal of only we know. Photo by William Halliday.
The Rehearsal Process: Improvisation and Authenticity

Approaching my first rehearsal, I was very aware that I was going to attempt to recreate the environment of social dance spaces in the confines of a dance studio for a final piece that would premiere on a concert stage. In an effort to confront this issue, I made a list of other elements of a social dance space, from my experience, besides the physical space (e.g. laughter, bodies in contact, conversation, music, heat, etc.). Each of these elements would come into play during my entire rehearsal process. Before my dancers would enter the space, I’d have music playing in the background; a playlist cultivated to showcase the musical talents of African diasporic artists in all genres. As a way of opening up the dance space, we would check in while walking through the space. This was effective in getting to know each other and the room but also for simulating the way one would greet another person when they arrive at a social event. We would then transition into an untraditional warmup geared towards improvisation and group movement. As the music plays, one person acts as lead improviser and everyone else would follow. When the dancer no longer feels inspired to move, they would face someone else and that person then becomes the leader. Here, I wanted to establish a nonverbal rapport between the dancers and myself. I wanted to use the body as a means of directing attention and communicating. I also wanted to put my dancers in a low risk mindscape for improvisation. Through exercises like this one I wanted to build a relationship between each of us that we could later call upon to inspire and generate choreography.
In the process of generating movement for a piece based in social dancing, I was challenged to choreograph without choreographing. By this I am referencing the improvisational nature of social dancing that I felt was important to maintain. Questions that I faced during the process included: How do I put social dancing on the concert stage? How can I be as authentic to our natural movement and emotions while still telling the story that I want to tell? How much of the dance should be generated by me as opposed to my dancers? In the process of answering these questions, I introduced a variety of exercises, some of which I will describe below, to my dancers to stimulate their creative energy while also getting to know them better as people, as Black women, and as dancers.

Exercise 1: Free associate with the phrase Black Social Dance. Using this exercise, we collective compiled the following word with respects to Black Social Dance:

- Humble
- Hip Hop
- Fever
- Electric Slide
- Passion
- Wobble
- Arch in your Back
- Style
- Call/Response
- Lower Body
- Rhythm
- Dutty Wine
- Diaspora
- Soul Train
- Bounce
- Biggity
- Aggression
- Sisterhood
- Music
- Individuality
- Cha Cha Slide
- Breakdancing
- Black Woman
- Community
- Creator
- Expression
- Get Lite
- Controlled Sexuality
- Pop/Lock
- Isolation
- Partner
- Old/New
- Bronx
- Two Step
- Rap/Trap
- Soulja Boy

We then chose some of the words and created choreography based on them. I was curious about how certain words paired together and what feeling they conjured up such as Aggression and Controlled Sexuality or Black Woman, Sisterhood, and Community.

In our discussion, my dancers related their discomfort with the idea of the Black woman’s body on display in all other contexts outside of the social dance. We ruminated on what about dance can convert a historically painful narrative of the sexualization of Black women and the aggression towards Black women when in public spaces into a safe
public space. This brought us back to the words: sisterhood and community. The Black social dance sphere simultaneously affirms a sense of community and collectivity that compensates for the hypervisibility of the Black body in Black dance. We took this conversation and used it as a centering thought in the choreography we then produced. During the rehearsal process we also engaged in exercises where we shared our go to social dance move, collated items from popular culture that we saw as directly related to social dancing (e.g. sneaker culture and Beyonce’s album *Lemonade*), and explored social dance as unity vs social dance as resistance vs social dance as individual creativity. In addition to inspiring movement, these exercises allowed us to tackle a topic as expansive as Black down and narrow it down to what was important to us. The social dances that were featured and embodied in this piece were those that were versions of the dances ingrained in our movement memory. They told the story of who we were, where we come from, and the specificities of our unique experience as Black woman moving.

**The Final Production**

The fall thesis concert, featuring only two choreographers, was held in Wesleyan’s 92 Theater from November 2-4, 2017. *only we know* began as a sonic experience as audiences engaged with the music of the body. This was followed up by a trio, a solo, a duet, and another trio that opened up different layers of the experience of the Black woman in the social dance sphere (e.g. tradition, curiosity and exploration, loneliness yet hypervisibility, hope and joy). In addition to the trajectory of the work, other elements that were influenced by my research were music, lighting, and costumes. For *only we know* I wanted to experiment with rhythm and a diverse sources of sound.
For this reason, I began the piece with the sounds of our feet layered with the sounds of other foot-based games (e.g. double-dutch, get lite circle, and walking). This section introduces the audience to the linguistic capacities of the dancing body without music. I wanted to highlight the Black aesthetic and polyrhythms before I opened up the space to music. I then mixed together music that complemented the movement and was relevant to the work either in sound or message from “They Them” (2001) by Jan Jelinek and “Amor No Morro” (2017) by Sango to “Forward” (2016) by Beyoncé ft. James Black and “Beautiful People” (1999) by Barbara Tucker. Each of these songs set the tone for the piece and took audience members through an emotional journey. I also incorporated vocal sounds in the spoken word piece “Black Dance” by Dave Harris and through the use of our own voices. With respect to lighting and costume, I tasked myself with simulating the everyday social dance environment which meant natural, outdoorsy lighting, the appearance of a city block in the background during specific parts of the piece and skin-toned colored costumes in the shades on whites, browns, beige, and tan that would accentuate the body. (See example Figure 11)
Figure 11: *only we know* dancers strutting to the pulsing rhythm of Barbara Tucker’s “Beautiful People” in the final section of dance. Photo by William Halliday.

*Say It Loud*: Spring Senior Thesis Dance

Figure 12: Four social dancers from different decades meet at the beginning of the *Say It Loud*. Photo by Julian Johnson.
Conception of the Work

In many ways, my choreographic process the second time around mirrors that of the first, however there were choices that I made different after reflecting on the first piece. I started from the similar juncture, what feels urgent to me? I returned to the questions that both Reggie Wilson and Camille A. Brown ask themselves, what does it mean to be of the African diaspora? I was curious what it would have been like to be of a different decade or if my family had stayed in Costa Rica or had never been there to begin with. While these questions were circulating my brain, I came upon a story in Stearns’ Jazz Dance that goes as follows:

Berkshire Mountains called Music Inn, we tried an experiment. Our aim was to entertain – quite informally – a handful of guests in the lounge after dinner, but our host Philip Barber was carried away with his theory of instantaneous talent combustion. “Throw gifted performers together,” he said, “get one of them going, and watch them all discover talents which they didn’t know they had.” With various jazzmen of supposedly separate eras, the idea had worked well. That evening we had dancers from three different countries: Asadata Dafora from the Sierra Leone, West Africa; Geoffrey Holder from Trinidad, West Indies; and Al Minns and Leon James from the Savoy Ballroom, New York City. All of them were alert to their own traditions and articulate, eager to demonstrate their own styles. So we began with the Minns-James repertory of twenty or so Afro-American dances, from “Cakewalk to Cool,” asking Dafora and Holder to comment freely. The results were astonishing. One dancer hardly began a step before another exclaimed with delight, jumped to his feet, and executed a related version of his own. The audience found itself sharing the surprise and pleasure of the dancers as they hit upon similarities in their respective traditions. We were soon participating in the shock of recognizing what appeared to be one great tradition.214

This quote acted as the impetus for my spring dance, Say It Loud! In collaboration with three new dancers, Arielle Ashley, Shemaiah Clarke, and Rochelle Spencer, I wanted to explore the “similarities in [our] respective traditions.” As an extension of my first semester’s work, I decided to explore our joy, our memory, our history, and our dances.

Finding Movers

214 Stearns, 12.
Interestingly, each of my dancers had a distinct background and relationship to social dance from my own. They each were raised in the Caribbean (Trinidad and Jamaica) and thus their African diasporic dancers were of a different tone than my own as an African American. We spent a lot of time exchanging and comparing our movement vocabularies and getting to know each other’s personal aesthetic. In working with each dancer, I also wanted to pair their movement style with an African American dance style. Arielle Ashley perfectly embodied the groove and grounded-ness of 90’s hip hop while Spencer’s light and quick feet reflected dancers of the 20s as detailed in chapter two. Shemaiah’s style was quintessential 60’s with all the energy, flare, and “realness” that it encompasses (reference chapter three) whereas I aligned with the modern day (2000-2018) hip hop dancer.

Figure 13: Image of Say It Loud! dancers. From Left to Right: Amira Chambers Ottley ‘18, Shemaiah Clarke ‘18, Arielle Ashley ‘18, and Rochelle Spencer ‘19. Photo by Julian Johnson.
The Rehearsal Process

In the process of developing the dance, I found that each of us intersected in our love for high energy movement. I realized that while my last semesters dance was at times sobering in its message, this dance could not be anything other than joyful. This concreted my desire to explore Black joy and memory through movement. I also knew that I wanted to remain as close to social dance vocabulary as possible (in contrast to last semester where I incorporated elements of modern dance movement into the social dances). This attempt to engage with the expressive practices of Black social dance in a way that was “authentic” while also putting together a 10-minute piece that worked on a proscenium stage was challenging. How would I apply my four years of Modern-based choreographic training to social dance? Often during rehearsal my dancers and I appeared to be acting, with the rigidity of choreography taking away from the improvisational nature of social dancing. In an effort to combat this I got rid of the rehearsal structure I had been using, similar to the one from the fall, and tried something different. When they entered rehearsal, I had music blasting and the colorful lights of Schonberg studio were on. My dancers and I were immediately immersed in a party atmosphere. Once I assessed that energy levels were up, we would begin with the movement exercises. One exercise that was especially useful was the line dance structure which I learned from Reggie Wilson.

Exercise: List as many line dances as you know and then find one that appears on everyone’s list. Once you have chosen a line dance, repeat it four times and pay attention to the structure of the dance. Now keep the structure but replace the moves.
For this exercise, we landed on the Electric Slide, a four wall line dance. We then replaced the steps with our favorite social dance moves (e.g. Tek Weh Yuhsell) all the while maintaining the rhythm of the original dance. This exercise allowed us to be creative, to incorporate the moves we love with a traditional Black line dance, and to employ a structure that would move through space nicely on a proscenium stage. Through this exercise and others, we found new ways to incorporate the creative, playful spirit of Black social dance.

The Final Production

_Say It Loud!,_ the title inspired by a James Brown song, was presented three times in the 92 Theater from April 12-14, 2018. During all three runs the work filled my dancers, the audience, and me with an overwhelming sense of joy. Whereas my first semester’s work fluctuated between a sense of sobering reality and that of communal love, this semester was compact with joy and laughter. From the first moment in the dance, high energy and the beat were present. It opened with mini social dancing vignettes that would reappear later in the piece. The work then traversed time as the four social dancers danced through memories, lost and present. The initial pairing of moves from the Adzogbo dance ceremony of Ghana with Capoeira Angola music reflected a diasporic African position in which our identity is the collection of scattered parts. The piece then travelled through the social dance scenes of the 20s, 60s, 90s, and 00’s overlapping dance moves and sounds reminiscent of each. Some of the decade-inspired music featured in this work included Nina Simone’s “See-Line Woman” (1964), P-Funk’s “Feel Like Funkin’ It Up” (1997), both Nina Simone and Aretha Franklin’s
versions of “Young, Gifted, and Black” (1970 and 1972) and George Kranz “Din Daa Daa” (1984). The colorful, textured lighting then functioned to accentuate the celebratory atmosphere of four women dancing together and sharing in body memory. The costumes, all of a similar color scheme (royal blue, white, and mustard/ yellow) aided in character development as each person was dressed according to their respective decade (Figure 13). Say It Loud! tiptoed the lines between storytelling and dance party in a manner that was jubilant and thoughtful (Figure 14).

Figure 14: The four dancers of Say It Loud! move down a classic Soul Train line (note the similarities to Figure 7). Photo by Julian Johnson.

Conclusion

In short, chapter four calls upon the ideas cultivated in chapters one through three to explore Black social dance as embodied research. Rather than theorizing on what it is to dance while Black or telling the stories of Black dances, dancers, and dance spaces of the past, in chapter four I reflect on the practice of moving while Black. After
acknowledging the influence of choreographers such as Reggie Wilson and Camille A. Brown on my work, I provide a detailed account of my fall and spring senior thesis dances: *only we know* and *Say It Loud!*. While *only we know* shed light on the complexities and difficulties that have shaped the Black aesthetic (e.g. hypervisibility, sexualization of Black bodies, and marginalization), it also explores themes of community and sisterhood. *Say It Loud!*, on the other hand, exists in a liminal space where all Black social dances and dancers intersect, sharing in the joy that comes with the dance. Upon reflection, the process of embodying the Black aesthetic was in many ways a process of self-recognition. It was the process of tapping into a sensibility that has always been with me and my dancers. And yet, it is also difficult to sum up than previous chapters as its impact resonates on a kinesthetic level.
Conclusion

Looking B(l)ack: Concluding Thoughts on EmBOD(Y)ing Movement

My decision to spend this last year researching and exploring the junction of embodied movement and social movement within the Black community was not simply academic curiosity but an urgent personal journey to understand myself, to identify why I am drawn to these two active spaces and how I can consolidate these two passions of mine. From this perspective, this thesis was in the works when I danced at my first family barbeque, when I went to my first protest, and/or when I made the decision to major in American Studies and Dance. Having experienced the racial performativity and the construction of identity that is a natural occurrence in both these spaces, this thesis presented the opportunity for me to ground what I sensed, but couldn’t articulate, in theory, history, and practice.

In chapter one, I was able to push the conversation of race as social construct and explore race as a historically-built, kinesthetic, lived-experience. I found that Black identity, Black aesthetics and Black dance function as survival mechanisms, constantly being refashioned as to improve the Black reality and to inspire Black self-esteem. In the case of the Harlem Renaissance which I reflect upon in chapter two, the social dance space challenged ideas of the Black body and how it is read from both inside and outside of the community. On top of that, it put integration into practice, economically supported the Black community as much as it could and fostered a strong Black network for the first time in the United States. In the example of the Black Power Movement, chapter three, the sociopolitical activism of the time and the social dance scene had a
symbiotic relationship. The politics of this era influenced the social dance scene of the time as highlighted in the P-Funk example but the social dance scene also impacted the Black-oriented aesthetic and the message of Black empowerment message that spread to the masses thus mobilizing a mental shift in the nation. Chapter four comes full circle focusing the thesis the lived experience of my dancers and I through the vehicle of dance. As a body of work, my scholarship puts forth an interdisciplinary, creative approach to understanding race and performativity in America.

Recognizing that there is much more to be explored with respects to this topic and that my research only touches the surface of this subject, I will propose a future direction for scholars to take this research. Using my scholarship as a historical base, how can the connection between Black dance and Black social movement be translated to the current moment? Today, one of the biggest movements to mobilize the Black community has been Black Lives Matter (2013- ). In this age of technology, the social networking and organizing of people that used to transpire on the ground now takes place on the internet. Similarly, the internet has created the space for an international dance community particularly with respects to hip hop dance (e.g. YouTube). So then, how does Black dance function in this high-tech, politically charged environment? Is the dynamics of this relationship symbiotic or contentious? Or does movement lose its functionality over the web. Whether it be this or another study, Black dance like all social institutions will continue to connect with the history, culture, and power dynamics of its era but what is to be determined is if we will fully realize its potential and starting moving towards a more equitable world.
Appendix

Moving While Black Playlist

Here is a link to the spotify playlist: for the following music:
https://open.spotify.com/user/22umkx2zibgr4pmwa64r3qbra/playlist/1YCWo0f7MNBJLTKysehLsX?si=0hWK2kaeQJCdtSjWp6awzQ

Chapter Two:

“The Original Black Bottoms” - Perry Bradford
“Stompin’ at the Savoy”- Chick Webb
“Home, Sweet Home” - Waltz song

Chapter Three:

“Cold Sweat”- James Brown (1968)
“Say It Loud. I’m Black, and I’m Proud.” - James Brown (1968)
“Everyday People” - Sly and the Family Stone (1968)
“Music for my Mother”- Funkadelic (1969)
“If You Don’t Like the Effect, Don’t Produce the Cause”- Funkadelic (1972)
“Wake Up”- Funkadelic (1972)
“We Hurt Too”- Funkadelic (1972)
“Chocolate City” - Parliament (1975)
“Mothership Connection” (album)- Parliament (1975)
“Free Your Mind and Your Ass Will Follow”- Funkadelic (1970)
“One Nation under the Groove”- Funkadelic (1978)
“Woman’s Got Soul” - The Impressions (1965)

Chapter Four:

“Lemonade” (album)- Beyonce (2016) *unavailable on spotify*
“They Them”- Jan Jelinek (2001)
“Amor No Morro”- Sango (2017)
“Forward”- Beyonce ft. James Black (2016) *unavailable on spotify*
“Beautiful People” (Club Mix) by Barbara Tucker (1999)
“Chula”- Capoeira Angola
“See-Line Woman”- Nina Simone (1964)
“I Feel Like Funkin It Up”- Rebirth Brass Band (1997)
“Young, Gifted, and Black”- Aretha Franklin (1972)
“Young, Gifted, and Black”- Nina Simone (1970)
“Din Da Daa”- The Roots (1984)
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