Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing

Jonathan David Jackson

The excellent body of literature on African-American (or black) expressive culture often refers to the importance of improvisation in black vernacular dancing. In their discussion of key precepts upon which black vernacular dancing is based, Marshall and Jean Stearns explain that dance in the African diaspora “places great importance upon improvisation, satirical and otherwise, allowing freedom for individual expression; this characteristic makes for flexibility and aids the evolution and diffusion of other African characteristics” (1968, 15). Jacqui Malone notes that black vernacular dancing is “an additive process...a way of experimenting with new ideas; that mindset is Africa’s most important contribution to the Western Hemisphere” (1996, 33). She goes on to declare:

All African American social dances allow for some degree of improvisation, even in the performance of such relatively controlled line dances as the Madison and the stroll of the fifties...the idea of executing any dance exactly like someone else is usually not valued....Black idiomatic dancers always improvise with intent—they compose on the spot—with the success of the improvisations depending on the mastery of nuances and the elements of craft called for by the idiom. (33–34)

Brenda Dixon Gottschalk also asserts that “the improvisation aesthetic...characterizes so much of Africanist endeavor” (1996, 117). Dixon Gottschalk maintains that “African American culture has always been subversive and improvisatory, by force of circumstance, with its members adept at code-switching—both in verbal and body language—as the need arises” (2000, 221). In his study of vernacular dancing in Philadelphia black communities, John Roberts (1995, 24) relies on Ralph Ellison’s definition of the “vernacular”—a definition that itself notes the role of improvisation. Says Ellison,

the vernacular [is] a dynamic process in which the most refined styles from the past are continually merged with the play-it-by-eye-and-play-by-ear

Jonathan David Jackson is an interdisciplinary scholar, performer, and poet. He specializes in the history and ethnology of contemporary American performance and the cultural criticism of literature and film. Jackson is currently completing his doctoral dissertation, a historical ethnography of voguing, in the Dance Department at Temple University. For more than ten years, he has been a reviewer of theater arts and urban culture for Dance Magazine, The Washington Review, and The Philadelphia City Paper. His poems have appeared in Ploughshares. He is the winner of a 2001 Pushcart Prize for poetry and the recipient of the 2001 Selma Jeanne Cohen Award from the Society of Dance History Scholars for his presentation “Gender Representation in the Latest Form of the Black/Latino(a) Dance Form Called ‘Voguing.’”
improvisations which we invent in our efforts to control our environment and entertain ourselves....In it the styles and techniques of the past are adjusted to the needs of the present;...wherever we find the vernacular process operating we also find individuals who act as transmitters between it and earlier styles, tastes, and techniques. (1987, 208)

Roberts and Ellison analyze the ways in which African-American heritage is maintained at the same time in which black "styles, tastes, and techniques" evolve over time with the aid of "play-it-by-eye-and-play-by-ear improvisations." Roberts' and Ellison's supposition that black vernacular practices depend on improvisation complements Houston Baker's view that, "The material conditions of slavery...and the rhythms of Afro-American blues combined and emerged...as an ancestral matrix that has produced a forceful and indigenous American creativity." The authors above and Katrina Hazzard-Donald (formerly Hazzard-Gordon) (1985, 1990, and 1996), LeeEllen Friedland (1983 and 1995), Cheryl Willis (1994), Tricia Rose (1994), and Robert Farris Thompson (1996) all describe African-American vernacular dancing as a continuum of evolving improvisational aesthetic endeavor.

Yet, questions remain. What specific creative processes—what symbolic actions and relationships—constitute improvisation in black vernacular dancing? How are such processes a reflection of identity formation (the defining of self in relation to community), socialization (or the development of norms), social change (the evolution and problematizing of traditions), and social interaction (or the interrelationship of members within a community)?

In this essay, I discuss the basic improvisational aesthetics that inform the practice of black vernacular dancing. In my analysis, the term aesthetics specifically refers to intersecting concepts of cultural value and criteria for action. I offer an aesthetic framework within which we may study the particular kind of choreographing that is valued in African-American vernacular dancing, specifically the experience of these black dance traditions in their originating social contexts, such as the rural field, the jookin' joint, the speakeasy, the urban street, the ballroom, the nightclub, the cabaret, and the rent party. It is out of the parameters of this essay to address the adaptation or distortion of the dancing in mediums such as the concert stage, television, video, or film. I am able to speak "globally" because our various black movement traditions are choreologically contemporaneous. Emery (1988), Dixon-Stowell (1988), Roberts (1995), and Hazzard-Donald (1990, 1985, and 1983) continually argue this point throughout their research. Decisive evolutions in which new vernacular traditions are developed in different black communities, such as the emergence of the Lindy Hop in the 1930s and the development of breakdance in the early 1980s, appear at the same time that particular steps and forms are recast and recycled and principles of physical, spatial, aural, and qualitative action are passed on from one tradition to the next.

In addition to my attempts to explain an aesthetic framework, I also provide some insight into how such a framework helps to construct culture in black communities. From an ethnological point of view, such a claim might seem wholly apparent. The anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler observes not only that "dance is a socially constructed movement system," but also that "the dance communication process...involves...making sense out of...human bodies in time and space according to the cultural conventions and aesthetic systems of a specific group of people at a specific time in specific contexts" (1995, 31 and 41–42). Yet, from the decontextualization of the Lindy Hop by such ballroom dancers as Dean Collins and the balletic
hybridization of so called “modern jazz dance” to Hollywood’s brief mass marketing of breakdance and Madonna’s appropriation of voguing, the commodification and distortion of black vernacular dancing for mainstream white Euro-American consumption is as enduring as the traditions themselves. The primary effect of such cultural appropriation is the denial of the dancing’s traditional cultural context and a misnaming of the ways in which the dancing evolves by the people who originate the traditions. Other effects include the devaluation of the dancing as “low-culture” (or as fads) and the concomitant rejection of rich cultural meaning and aesthetic intelligence.

In the face of appropriation, analyzing processes of cultural construction provides fresh perspectives about the very real presence of what LeeEllen Friedland calls “social commentary” and Hazzard-Donald calls sociological “meaning operatives” in the dancing. Friedland’s processes of social commentary speak to the ways in which blacks communicate with one another through the dance. These processes are annotation, or the free-association upon or exaggeration of cultural symbols; imitation, or the ability to reproduce with uncanny precision; and subversion, or the ability to parody cultural symbols within and outside of black communities. Friedland’s processes complement Hazzard-Donald’s meaning operatives. Hazzard-Donald argues that black dancing figures life as a complex interrelationship among the constructions of identity, cultural integrity, in-group/out-group negotiations of norms, and political resistance. These sociocultural concepts are fundamental to an understanding of the way cultural meaning is made in the dancing. Although an inseparability between sociocultural concepts and aesthetics might seem obvious cross-culturally, aesthetic theory in dance studies has often separated discussions of creative process from cultural interpretation.

I define African-American vernacular dance traditions as a complex family of forms and steps that includes hand dancing, rhythm tap, stepping, and line dancing; plantation-era traditions such as shouting and buck-n-wing; ragtime-era traditions such as the Charleston, Cakewalk, and Black Bottom; swing-era traditions such as the Lindy Hop, Shim Sham Shimmy, and various blues dances (boogie woogie, eagle rock); soul-era or rock ‘n’ roll traditions such as the bop, and steps like the watusi and mashed potato; late twentieth-century traditions of house, jacking, wave, boogaloo, breakdance, and the three forms of voguing: old way, new way, and vogue femme. As Dixon Gottschild notes, improvisation in black vernacular dancing requires a thorough knowledge of these traditions and their interrelationship so that when one structures the dancing, one always begins and ends “with the defining steps of the dance” (1996, 117).

Although my discussion analyzes foundational precepts of improvisation in black vernacular dancing, I do not claim to be comprehensive in the substantiation of my framework. The evidence I present to illustrate my claims is carefully chosen and selective. For ethnographic evidence, I draw from my own fieldwork, education in and teaching of vernacular dancing, and previous literature that identifies and analyzes the dancing in its originating sociocultural contexts. It is my hope that my ethnographic and historical examples will indicate directions for future studies of improvisational commonalities, adaptations, and distortions in the dancing of different kinds of black communities.

**Improvisation as Choreography: An Abiding Principle**

The central principle on which my analysis is based is that in African-American vernacular dancing improvisation is choreography. Such a view problematizes preexisting definitions of
improvisation in literature on the creative process in dance studies. Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin note that "improvisations serve as a preparation, as mental-physical-emotional 'seeding of the bed' out of which your choreography will grow" (1982, 5). Of improvisation in the choreographic process, Elizabeth Hayes notes that "improvisation is not a substitute for composition...composition is always the result of planning and selection on the part of the composer" (1993, 25). These definitions are overwhelmingly directed toward concertized modes of dancing originated primarily by European or Euro-American innovators in idioms identified as modern dance, classical ballet, and even musical theater dancing (by such choreographers as Jack Cole, Gus Giardano, and Bob Fosse). I use the term concertized here because these modes are predominantly composed for and presented in proscenium-arch stage environments, black box theaters, or other arrangements that encourage a spatial and, by extension, conceptual separation between performer and audience.

Delineating improvisation as choreography in black vernacular dancing reveals the intrinsic value of oral communication and sensing in the dancing. By oral communication, I mean the passing on of values, aesthetics, and actual movement traditions through experiential knowledge and ritual work. By sensing, I mean the valorization of emotion as a path toward intelligent knowing. Sensing also signifies a heightened, in-the-moment, understanding of one's relationship to forces in the environment around the body (like gravity and the weighted pull of the ground) and the acknowledgment of psychosomatic forces that embrace unknowable, mystical forces perceivable by faith. These values—especially the understanding of emotional and physical experience as intelligent endeavor—challenge us to rethink the "pervasive influence of the Platonic-Cartesian notion of person" in much "Western (i.e., European and European derived) cross-cultural analyses (Farnell 1999, 345). Brenda Farnell argues that these Western influences contain problematic "dualisms of mind/body, mental/behavioral, reason/emotion, subjective/objective, inner/outer, and nonmaterial/material" (1999, 345). She is correct in her claim that human movement systems—with their tremendous capacity for shifting sociocultural meaning—resist Platonic-Cartesian metaphysics. The dancing of specific communities like African Americans contains fascinating strategies that embody this resistance.

At the end of the twentieth century (in very different movement vocabularies and styles from black vernacular dancing), certain modern or postmodern dance idioms value some aspects of the view of oral communication and sensing mentioned above. (Here I refer to idioms like contact improvisation and Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen's practice of Body-Mind Centering.) It is not that these values of communication and sensing are absent in some white American practices; it is that these values are longstanding and incontrovertibly fundamental in African-American vernacular dancing.

Cynthia Jean Cohen Bull (formerly Cynthia Novack) draws an implicit relationship between early modern dance's "division between improvisation and set choreography" and its frequent reduction of black vernacular dancing to low art (1997, 18). Bull notes:

Early [modern] choreographers...sought to elevate modern dance to the status of an art form, insisting on a new role for dance in America. Consequently, they...help[ed] to establish a division between improvisation and set choreography. Ironically, Isadora Duncan, who had taught improvisionally and who may have improvised in performance, had also tried to distance her
“high” art from the “primitive” improvisations of “Negro jazz dance” and
music. (1997, 18)

When applied to non-Euro-American dance traditions, this concertized division between
improvisation and set choreography runs the risk of being ethnocentric. Rajika Puri and Diana
Hart-Johnson’s research revealed considerable “misconceptions about the acts of improvisa-
tion and composition” in certain ahistorical aesthetic discussions in dance studies (particularly
the early work of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone). Building on the teachings of the anthropologist
Drid Williams, Puri and Hart-Johnson analyze how “misconceptions lead to fundamental mis-
understandings about the very processes involved in thinking and movement” cross-culturally
(1995, 158). Central to their arguments is the conception that “whether a dance is considered
to be improvised or composed depends on culturally specific distinctions that reflect the val-
ues of a given society” (158). Certainly this is the case in African-American vernacular danc-
ing in its original sociocultural contexts, where there is no division between improvisation and
composition. In black vernacular dancing, improvisation means the creative structuring, or the
choreographing, of human movement in the moment of ritual performance.

A Framework for Action
If, in my analysis, improvisation signifies in black vernacular dancing a particular kind of
choreographing in which values of oral communication and sensing are endemic, what
processes define this choreographing? Albert Murray’s theory of improvisation for black vern-
acular music in Stomping on the Blues (1976) is particularly useful to a discussion of improv-
isation in black vernacular dancing. Murray identifies “the blues” as a field of creative expres-
sion arising from the evolving social location of blacks in America. Although his analysis is
primarily musicological, Murray correctly links black American musical innovations with
dancing. Like Malone, Dixon Gottschild, Roberts, and Hazzard-Donald, Murray writes that
black vernacular dancing and music is “forged” on a principle of continual, renewed action
and resistance to obstacles in life or, as he calls it, “epic heroism.” He notes that “what the cus-
tomary blues-idiom dance movement reflects is a disposition to encounter obstacle after obsta-
cle as a matter of course….Indeed the improvisation on the break, which is required of blues-
idiom musicians and dancers alike, is precisely what epic heroism is based on” (254). Giving
greater clarification to terms that are (as he explains throughout the book) already widely in
use by vernacular black musicians and dancers, Murray’s three interrelated improvisational
processes—vamping, riffing, and the break (also called breaking in this essay)—can also be
applied to improvisation in black vernacular dancing. (The terms breaking and the break are
are not to be confused with breakdance.) He notes that a vamp is “an improvised introduc-
tion consisting of anything from the repetition of a chordal progression as a warm-up exercise to
an improvised overture” (93). A riff he identifies as “a brief musical phrase that is repeated,
sometimes with very subtle variations, over the length of a stanza as the chordal pattern fol-
lows its normal progression. Sometimes the riff chorus is used as background for the lead
melody and as a chordal response to the solo call line” (96). He also notes that a vamp can be
comprised of riffs of any variety. Murray calls the break,

a very special kind of ad-lib bridge passage or cadenzalike interlude between
two musical phrases that are separated by an interruption or interval in the
established cadence. Customarily there may be a sharp shotlike accent and the
normal or established flow of the rhythm and melody stop, much the same as
a sentence seems to halt, but only pauses at a colon. Then the gap, usually of
not more than four bars, is filled in most often but not always by a solo
instrument, whose statement is usually impromptu or improvised even when
it is a quotation or a variation from some well-known melody. Then when the
regular rhythm is picked up again ... it is as if you had been holding your
breath. (99)

Three principles inform Murray’s processes. First, so emblematic are these processes of
innovation in black vernacular music (including traditional blues songs, work songs, spiritu-
als, ragtime, swing, bop, rock ‘n’ roll, soul, or hip hop) that approximations of vamp ing, riff-
ing, and breaking are often scored into the arrangements of recorded musical compositions.
Yet, even here, these processes should embody the distinctive quality of spontaneity so that
the composition always reflects live performance. Thus, improvisation in black vernacular
music depends on the concept of live performances, whether of a ragtime band or of a disc
jockey (DJ) who spins “break beats” at a party. (In contemporary hip hop culture, break beats
are improvised rhythmic riffs taken from interruptions between phrases on a vinyl record of a
popular song and looped by a DJ on turntables to form a minimally varied, percussive column
of sound.)

Second, vamp ing, riff ing, and breaking are interrelated processes that intersect and over-
ap in the moment of performance. A vamp could consist of different kinds of riffs that may
culminate in a break. The break may lead to still more riffs even before the main melody and
choruses of a work formally begin. Third, the social context in which musicians come together
to structure sound is as important as the improvisational processes applied.

One of the most important aesthetics of black music and dance is an understanding of the
inseparability between sound and movement. This inseparability does not always mean that
particular musical and dance traditions develop simultaneously (like the intersecting histori-
cal development of the Lindy Hop dance and swing music). Rather, black vernacular music
and dance are conceptual and experiential partners that feed on the same processes for inven-
tion.

Building on Murray’s analysis, my framework conceptualizes improvisation in black ver-
nacular dancing as the experience of two overlapping and interrelated fields of symbolic phys-
ical action. These fields are not meant to be understood as conceptually opposite, but as mutu-
ally dependent in the experiential moment of the dancing. The first field I call individuation.
Here, processes of vamp ing, riff ing, and breaking characterize the work of the individ-
ual dancer as she or he moves to establish a unique identity according to her or his own physical
capabilities, personal style, and capacity for invention. Key to this field is the dancer’s nego-
tiation of her or his style according to the aesthetics that inform the dancing. These aesthetics
are always interrelating superstructural fundamentals (or the common principles of all black vernacular dancing) and ritualized adaptations (or actions that reflect the aesthetics of specific
black communities).

Perhaps the most extreme form of individuation occurs in exhibition, or novelty, dancing
as it was called in the pre-World War II swing era, or freestyle dancing in nightclubs today.
This form of individuation involves asserting such a pronounced sense of personal style that
the black vernacular dancer’s actions invite a charged, voyeuristic attention from the community at the ritual event. It is often this kind of individuation that pushes specific traditions to evolve new forms and steps. Generally, however, the work of individuation is a matter of the constant negotiation of personal style and community expectations.

As I will go on to describe in examples from characteristic vernacular dance experiences, I divide individuation into three kinds of processes of improvisational choreography for the individual performer. These are repeating (to intensify the experience); braiding (to produce complex, interwoven dynamic contrasts); and layering (phrasing to create a sense of flow, juxtaposition, overlap, or continuity between actions). Repeating, braiding, and layering are kinds of riffs that may occur as vamps (or improvised introductions). Or, this riffing—this constant, overlapping, repeating, braiding, and layering of actions—may involve organization of movement as the dance progresses. Such riffing may also precede or follow a break, or the arresting of the action for heightened effect. Such breaks may not always occur at the close of a dance, but may allow for false endings and the perception of on-goingness.

The second field I call ritualization. Recall that the terms individuation and ritualization are not opposite but mutually dependent conceptions. Ritualization refers to the level of movement organization that occurs among performers in the throes of making community—whether in contestation or celebration—at a ritual event. These essentially interactive processes include battling, or social competition among performers; call-response, signified variously in couple dancing and circle dancing (within which traditional divisions between participant and observer are broken down as a soloist dances in mounting response to the interaction of a fully engaged chorus); precision-work, including line dancing, stepping, and showmanship in tap; and jamming, or ecstatic, continuously changing, unpredictable group interaction.

Like the first field, ritualization embodies processes of vamping, riffing, and breaking. What distinguishes the two fields is that ritualization signifies the extent to which these processes provide creative means for the collective (and not just the individual) to negotiate the quality of their relations with each other. Possible group relations may include such overlapping processes as competition (a pronounced form of in-group/out-group negotiations for status); ritual celebration; satirical dancing (or actions of mockery, resistance, or derision of people within and/or outside of the given black community); or erotic coupling.

Crucial to understanding the work of each field of improvisational action is the notion that the forms and steps referred to earlier in this essay are the resources within which the black vernacular dancer individuates and ritualizes. Social change—gradual adaptation—is a constant in the history of the dancing. This means that, as different black communities in different geographic locations dance and communicate with each other, the meaning of the improvisational action changes. Yet, the principles, processes, and traditions discussed above endure.

Ethnographic Evidence: Improvisational Social Action

Explaining her process of witnessing an African dance company named Ko-Thi, the critic Joan Acocella observed that “What I was hungering for... was Aristotelian form. This is a Euro-American value: art as a parabola, with a beginning, middle and ending—a certain kind of shape, with a certain complication in the middle...Mozartean development” (Acocella 1995, 188). This by now classic cross-disciplinary Europeanist equation for the structuring of art is based in part on aesthetic principles developed in Aristotle’s Poetics (1982). Aesthetics for “art

46  Dance Research Journal  33/2 (Winter 2001/02)
as a parabola" are evident in Elizabeth drama, Baroque, Romantic, and classical music, and even in the principle of Freitag’s triangle in literature (Bell 1997, 27–30). Reconsidering the sociocultural relevance of this conceptualization provides a useful point of entry for understanding opening and closing effects in black vernacular dancing. The dominant effect of improvised beginnings and endings in black vernacular dancing is to mask and blur one’s entry into the social moment and to produce an ongoing, mutable experience. Key to this agenda is the positive value of repetition. Speaking of principles that can be applied to performing arts in the African diaspora in general, John Chernoff observes that “we are not yet prepared to understand how people can find beauty in repetition” and he notes the importance of understanding “how rhythms” in the performing arts of the African diaspora “work in a conversational mode” (1979, 55).

**Vamping** introduces conversations into the social moment. In the Lindy Hop of the swing era (1920s to 1930s), for a couple to sense a connection with four-to-the-bar rhythms even as they sense a connection to one another is called **jockeying**. **Jockeying** is a vamp that includes improvised, alternating (moving side-to-side in place) weight-shifting. It is a loose, easy, minimal, bent-kneed, close-touching (even leaning on each other), rocking back and forth in which partners do not progress out into the space. Resiliency and understatement (signified by a languid carriage of the body’s weight in the pelvis, legs, torso, and arms) reinforce **jockeying**’s twin purposes of getting used to the rhythm and to a partner. The term **jockeying** suggests the bent, rounded posture and rebounding, steady motion of a horse rider. The action begins very low-key and can be considered a vital “warm-up” that attunes the body-mind to the need for weight-sensing and rigorous listening to rhythmic patterns in the music. Dancers may always return to **jockeying** when they need to reacquaint themselves with dominant principles in the dance, principles such as the inseparability of music and dancing and the critical value of listening to all forces in the environment, including one’s partner. **Jockeying** is sometimes a critical preparation for the **swing-out** from open and closed positions (meaning either holding both arms close or releasing one arm, respectively).

The **swing-out** involves pulling into and away from one’s partner to gain momentum as a couple spins counterclockwise around an invisible central axis between them. Generally, this rebounding, pulling into and away from each other occurs in eight beats, with the couple arriving halfway around by the fourth beat and back to the original spatial orientation by the eighth beat. The third, fourth, seventh, and eighth beats are highly subdivided and syncopated and the legs step out (or accent) these syncopations and subdivisions. The follower (generally a woman) heightens this syncopation by twisting the hips to and fro in a counterpart to the stepping. This twisting of the hips adds a built-in erotic suggestion that is made all the more fascinating because it occurs while the body is being whipped around (sometimes at great speeds) in a whirling motion. The **swing-out** is the most basic pattern in the Lindy Hop. These actions serve as the foundation for ritualization—for ongoing interaction, be it competitive and/or erotic, between partners. As prefiguring and progressive action, respectively, **jockeying** and the **swing-out** renew the social aesthetics of the Lindy Hop and allow dancers multiple points of meaning-making in the action.

**Top-rocking** in hip-hop dancing (particularly in breakdance) is another alternating, weight-shifting, vamp, rhythmic pattern that establishes a “groove,” or a sense of repetitive ongoingness. Sensing the rhythmic inseparability of music and dance is critical here, too. Yet the social context is different in this late twentieth-century example. **Top-rocking** is a riffed nego-
tiation, the marking off of space around the body in preparation for a “battle” or competition with another “free-styler.” It usually precedes the six-step, an action performed on the ground, in which the weight of the body is borne on first the arms and then the legs as the body navigates a circular path around itself in roughly six steps. Or top-rock can introduce other preappendicular floor actions, including, as breakdancers say, posting, or rooting an arm in one spot on the ground and swinging the body around itself. These actions ultimately bring to mind the actions of a male gymnast on a pommel horse. The objective is to produce enough momentum to maintain the strong, whirling quality of the body around itself on the ground as the actions segue into various back or even head spins. Most important, the vamp of top-rocking is but a precursor for virtuosic motion within the break of the action. In other words, before one bests one’s opponent, the hip-hopper must first establish a conversation that signifies the dynamic quality of one’s aggression (competitiveness being a state of mind-body that may take many forms). Then, once the repetitive pattern of top-rock is arrested, dancers literally “get-down” and style out in the extended, heightened competitive space made between top-rocking and frozen poses on the floor.

In these characteristic examples it is difficult to chart the exact opening and closing of the action in the overall social context; several different dancers may introduce and close action at different or even overlapping times. The reaction of those who witness the action charges the environment with superstructural resonances of vocal and gestural support or derision. Moments within which the dancer is in the process of reinvigoration are filled in by these resonances. As individuation constantly intersects with ritualization, as individual style is negotiated according to communal standards and responses, the dancing keeps renewing itself. At a vogue ball, competitors in the latest form of voguing called “vogue femme” will almost always hide within the crowd of onlookers at the back of the “runway” (or performance environment) to mask their entrance. Then, sometimes voguing on the ground while crawling in between the legs of onlookers or even bursting through the crowd, the performer blurs his or her entrance, creating what voguers call an “ovah effect,” or an excellent moment of surprising innovation. This masking and hiding while vamping sometimes draws out a battle for a very long time because it is not always known when or where the action is developing until the entire body of the competitors is seen.

Breaking (or improvising after full-stops) can create heightened dynamic contrasts that further complicate this blurring of opening and closing effects in the social moment. In black collegiate stepping, precision does not mean dancing with the exact same dynamic quality. What is precise is the rhythmic interplay and the finely tuned sense of connection among the group, so that when and if one person starts minute syncopations while patting rhythms on the body, the connection creates a chain reaction of mounting call-response. This kind of riffing, which may involve spontaneous improvisations layered onto prearranged or traditional actions, is a matter of sensual connectivity. This connectivity is even more pronounced in the more exhibitionistic example of rhythm tap called the flash act. Watching the upper bodies of archetypal duos such as the Nicholas Brothers or Buck and Bubbles can be an instruction in the very improvised inexactness of hands and arms as they paint imaginary swaths of energy in the air in front and around the body, palms splayed out. Here the spatial orientation—the facing of the body, direction, and location of action—is roughly the same among performers. The tapped accenting of rhythms in the lower body also keeps the dancers in sync even while they sense the effect of the action in their upper bodies in very inexact counterdistinction from
each other. The difficulty of the flash act—its syncopated, acrobatic innovations—makes it even more improbable that such rhythmic exactness and sensual connectivity is always maintained.

Riffing by inserting highly personal, often self-styled steps into the pattern of compulsory actions allows dancers to assert their distinctiveness in the company of peers. Here, novelty, exemplified in the vibratory accents of Earl “Snake Hips” Tucker or the erotic ruffling in Sandra Gibson’s boogie woogie, is prized. Yet, what makes novelty dancing a fitting example of individuation in black vernacular dancing is the degree to which personalized innovation is braided into traditional action. In the remarkable example of swing-era solo-form boogie woogie in Dehn (ca. 1950), Gibson caresses her sides, buttocks, and breasts in free-associative autoeroticism, while clearly interweaving the three basic patterns of the boogie woogie (boogie place, boogie back, and boogie forward) with knock-kneed “Shorty George” steps. The experience is a simultaneously novel and traditional stylization of the boogie woogie.

Summary and Conclusion

In this essay, I have analyzed the basic aesthetics of improvisation in African-American vernacular dancing. My discussion is founded on the notion that improvisation in the dancing must be understood as a particular kind of choreographing enacted within the ritual moment of the actions. Black vernacular dance aesthetics force us to rethink dualistic Platonic-Cartesian notions and the sometimes ethnocentric divisions between improvisation and so-called set choreography. The cultural work of individuation and ritualization constantly overlaps and intersects as social commentary (as Friedland says) and meaning operatives (as Hazzard-Donald says) continually arise in the actions. The ruffling, vamp, and dancing on the break that occur in my two aesthetic fields serve as organizing principles for structured improvisation. The fact that particular traditions, forms, and steps are recycled at the same time that specific communities innovate their own adaptations of black vernacular dancing is a basic principle in the study of the dancing. Sometimes the relationship between specific communities is contentious. The values of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered voguing community are in many ways counter to the frequent machismo and heterosexism of archetypal hip-hop or breakdance “crews.”

It is my hope that this aesthetic discussion and ethnographic analysis may serve as a foundation upon which the following urgent questions may continue to be addressed: To what extent are these values, criteria, and actions hybridized conglomerations of values and practices from other peoples of color and mainstream American discourses, including other forms of dancing in the postcolonial African diaspora? How are these improvisational aesthetics and practices adapted or even distorted as various artists—white, black, and otherwise—translate the dancing to mediums such as television, music video, film, and the concert stage? Perhaps more systematized aesthetic and ethnographic analyses are a first step.

Notes

1. It is important to note that the exchange of money and dancing for exhibition is not absent from black vernacular dancing in originating social contexts. Yet, each of these social venues has an emphasis on interactive social construction that creates a very different spatial and communal effect from the concert stage or the music video.
2. Choreology is a term based on the theories of Rudolf Laban. It refers to concepts and principles of movement composition in terms of body action, experience in time (such as syncopated rhythm), sense of dynamic quality (or manner of execution), and environmental context (or spatial directionality, dimensionality, and other concepts of location and locomotion). It is distinct from the term choreography, which refers to the practice of creating a dance (or movement system).

3. Jane Desmond speaks about such ahistorical aesthetic discussions in her introduction to Meaning in Motion (1997). In addition to many dance composition texts, including Humphrey (1959), Horst (1961), H'Doubler (1940), Blom and Chaplin (1982), Johnson (1995), and Minton (1986), such aesthetic discussions are epitomized by Sheets-Johnstone (1966).

4. Traditions are groupings of forms developed during particular historical eras, in particular black subcultures (swing can be said to be a combination of a variety of forms that include the Lindy Hop and boogie woogie variations; voguing is made up of three forms—old, new, and femme). Sometimes the name of a form overlaps with the name of the entire tradition.

5. Forms are symbolic actions full of complex patterns for the whole body, or for two or more bodies dancing in relation to one another. Black vernacular forms are often developed in competitive social performance. With names that are sometimes the same as traditional forms, some forms are Charleston, shouting/ring shout, Lindy Hop, boogaloo, locking, old-way vogue, and vogue femme. The list goes on and on.

6. Forms are, in turn, made up of shorter (in time duration) systematized, actions called steps. These steps are common, patterned exchanges of weight for the lower body. Sometimes these steps have coordinating gestures for the upper body or distinct actions such as a particular type of fall or turn. Many of these steps have the same name as some traditions and forms. For example, a term like “Charleston” refers to a tradition, a collection of forms or variations, and a certain step or exchange of weight. Examples of named black vernacular steps are camel walk, susie-q, tootsie roll, or in the case of falls to the ground in voguing, can’s eye dips or Machiavelli dips.

7. In addition to ongoing nightclub “house” dancing in the Northeast, I studied with, among many jazz dance teachers, Tyrone Murray in Washington, D.C. (at the 8th and G Streets Stables Arts Center) in the late 1980s. Murray’s “Afro-Jazz” (his word) classes beautifully wove traditional vernacular forms into West African dance patterns. In the academy, I have also studied plantation and ragtime era forms with Karen Hubbard, and swing in select workshops with Norma Miller, Chaz Young, and Steven Mitchell. In private studios, I have studied house dancing with Monchell London at the Rennie Harris Dance Studio in Philadelphia in the 1990s. As an adolescent I studied and practiced breakdance intermittently at the Market Five Gallery street outreach program sponsored by Mayor Marion Barry Summer Youth Employment program in D.C. in the summers of 1986, 1987, and 1988. (I moved away from breakdance because of the machismo and homophobia of the guys in these programs.) I studied voguing with members of the “ballroom scene” as part of my current ethnographic work.

8. In addition to video recordings of black vernacular dancing such as by Mura Dehn (ca. 1950), see the sources listed at the beginning of this essay and, for example, Emery (1988), Cayou (1971 and 1970), Dixon-Stowell (1988), and Otto (1995). Descriptions of characteristic performances of vogue femme in this essay are drawn from my own fieldwork in the voguing subculture in 1998 and 1999 in Philadelphia.
9. See also Dixon Gottschild (1996) for an analysis of the "presence" of black dance traditions in these modern and postmodern practices.

10. It is important to note that in her later work, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone replaces aesthetic ahistoricism with a bioevolutionary interpretation of cultural construction and art-making. See, for example, Sheets-Johnstone 1992 and 1990.

11. My descriptions are not meant to function as documentation from which the dancing can be reconstructed.

Works Cited


Scarecrow Press, Inc.

Dance Research Journal 33/2 (Winter 2001/02)