CHAPTER 3

Black Women Keep the Tempo

The Impact of Black Women on Jazz and Tap Dance in the USA

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Chloe Arnold (2019) stands on a square wooden platform in the middle of the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. and declares, "There have always been women in tap dance killing the game: Dianne Walker, Jennifer Jones, Mable Lee, Juanita Pits, the Whitman Sisters. If you don't know about them we're here to change that." After this, Arnold leads her all-women tap ensemble in one of several performances of the night. Each performance provides an advanced rhythmic interchange between the performers and the DJ's musical arrangement, meanwhile featuring multi-faceted presentations of agency and pleasure in the women of color dancers. Arnold and the Syncopated Ladies sit at a fertile intersection of race, gender, nationality, and dance. Their performance serves as a window into how Black women Jazz and Tap dancers have preserved the forms and become living archives for the specific embodied knowledge Black women dancers attain. This chapter seeks to unearth the ways Black women have navigated and contributed to Jazz and Tap dance in the USA.

Jazz and Tap dance, like baseball and apple pie, are distinctly American; therefore, the complex politics of the USA are embedded in the forms. General Google searches of Jazz and Tap dance pioneers result in lists emphasizing artists such

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as Fred Astaire (1899–1987), Jack Cole (1911–1974), Bob Fosse (1927–1987), Gus Giordano (1923–2008), Gregory Hines (1946–2003), Gene Kelly (1912–1996), Luigi (1925–2015), Matt Mattox (1921–2013), and Ginger Rogers (1911–1995). While these people have contributed to the dance field, dance canons like these are problematic because they omit or minimize the labor, expertise, and creative interventions of Black women Jazz and Tap dancers. This chapter employs a combination of historical methodologies, feminist dance analysis, and Black performance theory to analyze the mechanisms by which Jazz and Tap dance in the USA becomes raced and gendered (Gottschild 1998). For an accurate understanding of Jazz and Tap's history and current directions in the USA, the significant contributions of Black women artists must be investigated. This chapter will also serve as a composite of counter-narratives that emphasize and value the contributions of Black women in Jazz and Tap dance.

While Jazz and Tap dance developed in the USA, West African dance forms and aesthetics heavily influenced both. The trans-Atlantic slave trade forcibly enslaved and transported approximately 12.5 million Africans to North America, South America, and the Caribbean; 388,000 of whom landed in the USA. Lindsay Guarino and Wendy Oliver (2014) in discussing the history, legacy, and trends in African diasporic dance, conceptualize Jazz dance as a continuum rooted in West African dance forms that diverges into various offshoots like Tap, and although there are distinctions, West African roots are at the core of each. However, these forms became distinctly American due to their fusion of Europeanist influences into the Africanist roots.

Jazz dance in the 21st century has become synonymous with outstretched hands, bouncy flirtatious struts, and quick sex appeal, but there is much more. Jazz dance can be defined as a movement genre that utilizes and often emphasizes a grounded flat foot orientation toward the earth and often an accentuated bending or manipulation of the torso, hips, knees, ankles, and pelvis (Guarino and Oliver 2014). Jazz dance often includes ample paradoxes in which isolation

and individuality are essential corporally and socially while emphasizing a holistic community approach. A self-assured attitude and stylistic embellishment are often layered onto polycentric and polyrhythmic movement to create a dynamic, textured, and asymmetric movement quality (Guarino and Oliver 2014). Thus, Jazz dance has become an umbrella term to encompass dance that is low to the ground, quick, rhythmic, precise, sexy, and cool (Guarino and Oliver 2014). While there are specific Jazz dance styles, including Musical Theater Jazz, **Jazz Funk**, Latin Jazz, **Hip-hop**, and more, each has its own parameters and histories that influence its individual development.

Although racial division was a key aspect of American culture, in the 19th century there were some places where cultures fused. Most famously the **Five Points**, a New York City slum, brought together Blacks, Chinese immigrants, and immigrants from across Europe (particularly Ireland). Through this cultural kaleidoscope, Tap dance was born (Anbinder 2002). Tap is distinguished by emphasizing rhythmic sound amplified by the feet. Percussive elements are embodied, performed, and combined with vocal cues to produce an acoustic interplay of rhythms (Hill 2010). Like Jazz, there are various styles of Tap dance that contain aesthetics and nuanced values, including **Rhythm Tap**, **Flash Act Tap**, and Broadway Tap. While some may assume that the attention to detail within the feet may make this dance form easier, they are incorrect. Tap dance is a full-body experience that is often lead by the feet; however, the rest of the body is still active. While some steps require large dramatic swings of the arms, propelling into the air, acrobatic tricks, and slides across the stage, more stationary steps may require nimble shifts of weight and advanced training of specific muscle groups beyond the feet. Whether the dancers use their feet as a separate instrument or an extension of the existing rhythm, Tap dance is to be seen *and* heard.

Jazz and Tap dance rely on the Africanist traditions of community, competition, innovation, and improvisation. At their inception, Jazz and Tap dance closely followed the

Africanist tradition of linking music and dance, which is no surprise as both are African derived, and the pioneers also have African ancestry (Malone 2006). In both Jazz and Tap dance, there is an emphasis on creating a conversation with the music. Dancers exercise polycentrism, activating different parts of the body, to embody and riff on the initial rhythm of the music (Malone 2006). Therefore, Jazz music must be recognized as a central element in Jazz and Tap dance as it impacts the sound and feel of the performance. In some instances, dancers become like additional instruments, which provide a reciprocal visualization of the rhythms (Malone 2006).

Jazz and Tap dance are also vernacular dance forms rooted in community expression, struggle, and communication (Wong 2020). These dance forms were political in the ways they allowed oppressed communities to claim power, passion, and space for themselves in the USA (Wong 2020). Jazz and Tap dance became ways for communities of color in the USA to exert their humanity, especially Black communities whose family legacies had been displaced and disenfranchised by slavery. This ugly history created the need for community resilience, which became evident in the music and dance. Through techniques of improvisation, syncopation, patting Juba, polyrhythm, humor, and groundedness, Black Americans subverted traditional power structures and imagined futures of liberation (Wong 2020). Despite their original intentions of freedom, Jazz and Tap dance were coopted to service the predominately White US entertainment industry.

The entertainment industry, including but not limited to **Minstrelsy**, **Vaudeville**, Broadway, Film, and Television, utilized Jazz and Tap dance for capital gain with limited opportunity or acknowledgment of the Black women dancers who were maintaining and advancing the forms (Gottschild 1998; Wong 2020). Further, the depictions of Black people in media have historically been toxic caricatures that flatten and denigrate Black people and their livelihood (Wong 2020). There is a pattern in which Black creatives set a trend that is demonized by mainstream culture, and then after

White creatives copy the trend, it becomes accepted, popular, and profitable (Wong 2020). The politics surrounding the dancing are part and parcel of the dancing itself. While it may be convenient to discuss only the moving body, the politics that influence who dances, how dance is valued, and how dance forms are racialized, are all essential in understanding Jazz and Tap dance as a field.

Jazz and Tap dance, as performed in the 21st century, include Europeanist influences. However, these influences are heavily tied to racist American traditions. The inclusion of Europeanist aesthetics often demeaned and devalued Africanist aesthetics and traditions, in which the forms are based, in favor of **Whiteness**. Scholars Crystal U. Davis and Jesse Phillips-Fein (2018) define **Whiteness** in the following manner:

> Scholars from a range of disciplines define **Whiteness** in overlapping and interconnected ways, including a presumed 'European' heritage signified by light skin and associated phenotypic features, considered a 'pure' race and the superior apex of humanity (Painter, 2010); an unmarked racial category operating as a universalized standard against which other racial groups are judged as different and deficient (Frankenberg, 1997); a set of cultural values constructed to be normative and thus experienced by whites as ordinary (Carter, 2007); the political, economic, and social privileges and advantages based on race (Lipsitz, 2006); and the social institutions created through colonialism to maintain power and accumulate resources for White people (Rasmussen et al. 2001).
>
> (572)

Thus, **Whiteness** as a concept extends beyond White bodies and morphs to reinforce the superiority of White skin, logic, and ways of being. Because **Whiteness** is a construct, anyone can ascribe to and perpetuate its violence regardless of skin color. **Whiteness** is also firmly established within American society, with its politics thus ingrained in American dance forms (Kraehe et al. 2018). The Black women discussed in this chapter are not immune to **Whiteness** and **White**

Supremacy; like everyone else in the USA they are socialized to value **Whiteness**. Despite this, the Black women discussed in this chapter navigate **Whiteness** to benefit themselves and other Black women in dance.

The inclusion of European aesthetics in Jazz and Tap dance was not a peaceful melting pot fusing cultures equally and equitably; rather, it sought to alter the movement and culture of the forms entirely to fit the frameworks of **White supremacy**. Scholar Tyson E. Lewis argues, "Racialized stylizations happen below the level of mental processing/propositional meaning making. Hence, there is a new reason for explaining the disconnect between thoughts ('But I'm not a racist!') and actions (microaggressions, discriminatory slips of the tongue, and so forth)" (Kraehe et al. 2018, 305). Therefore, the Whitening of these forms may not have been intentionally malicious, yet it is still detrimental because how one performs and perpetuates **Whiteness** is pervasive and subconsciously rewarded. The way these dance forms have been codified, maintained, and taught over the past century have reinscribed **Whiteness** (Kraehe et al. 2018).

Whiteness impacts the self-relationship while dancing, and the way one relates and navigates dance in the external world. Scholar Katrina Hazzard-Gordon (1985) writes that "the popular dances of [W]hite youth are often adopted directly from [B]lack culture and are rarely passed on intergenerationally" (430). Hazzard-Gordon demonstrates how **Whiteness** operates in dance by claiming existing dances. **Whiteness** teaches those with pale skin that they are able to have access to and ownership over whatever they choose and have no obligation to acknowledge Black and Brown people's labor (Kraehe et al. 2018). **Whiteness** in Jazz and Tap dance protects itself and invisibilizes the Africanist aesthetics and contributors that introduce and develop the forms (Gottschild 1998).

Whitewashing attempts to "refine and tame" Black vernacular dances by including Europeanist aesthetics (Kraehe et al. 2018, 575). Through dismantling complex polycentric steps, limiting their rhythmic emphasis, downplaying musicality,

devaluing improvisation, and extracting their social and spiritual contexts, White dancers have whitewashed these dance forms. Through whitewashing, Jazz and Tap dances are elongated, made erect, modified to fit a traditional eight-count, and layered on top of ballet technique. These whitewashed Black vernacular dances are then infused into the Whitestream, or the framework that reflects, supports, promotes, and profits White people (Kraehe et al. 2018). These whitewashed versions of Jazz and Tap dance became perfect fixtures within the Whitestream of American entertainment.

Dance scholar Nyama McCarthy-Brown (2018) argues, "Race cannot be extracted from the seeing or doing of dance" (471). The intersectional oppression of racism and sexism have silenced and disenfranchised Black women pioneers' contributions in American culture. Nadine George-Graves (2009) argues that the culture mixing of dance is not the main issue but rather, the disenfranchisement and exploitation of Black artists in American culture. For example, most mainstream producers saw Tap as a competitive and rhythmic art form only suited to men, and most of the talented women were forced to do uncomplicated steps in the chorus lines and look pretty, regardless of their ability (Hill 2010). The devaluing of women in Tap was evident, but opportunities for Black women were more restricted through colorism. Colorism, an additional facet of **White supremacy,** regarded Black people with lighter skin, straighter hair, and closer proximity to **Whiteness** as more valuable and worthy of additional opportunities such as performing in chorus lines (Hill 2010). (See Chapter 4). Black women dance artists often overcome specialized barriers that remain unacknowledged while their contributions are commodified and exploited; Black women are not provided with the same opportunities, credit, or capital as their White and male counterparts (George-Graves 2009).

The commodification, evaluation, and regulation of Black women's bodies throughout history also cannot be divorced from their navigation in dance. "The image of fat [B]lack women as 'savage' and 'barbarous' in art, philosophy, and

science, and as 'diseased' in medicine has been used to both degrade [B]lack women and discipline [W]hite women" (Strings 2019, 211). In the Whitestream, Black women have been reduced to body parts such as their butt or hair to reinscribe negative stereotypes (Collins 2000; Gottschild 2005). The dominance of the White Western values ingrained in the Europeanist aesthetics thus fosters exclusion and leaves Black women's specific knowledge in the background.

Jazz and Tap dance are vernacular dance forms in that they develop organically from the communities they serve. This is often without direct influence from a singular choreographer. The de-emphasis on a cult of individual artistic personality in favor of collective creation endemic to these aesthetics runs counter to a US culture driven by consumer capitalism. The social contexts and cultural paradigms are part and parcel of the dance forms as historians can trace the roots to no individual artist. Because of the close connection between the dance forms and the societies from which they emerge, analyzing movement allows scholars to make claims about the ways in which the world works. Scholar Katrina Hazzard-Gordon (1985) discusses key aspects of Black vernacular dances: identity, cultural integrity, ingroup-outgroup, and political resistance. The Black women dance artists discussed in this chapter navigate high stakes within these theoretical aspects to provide access, opportunity, and recognition for themselves and others. Although (and because) these forms come from rich larger communities, Black Jazz and Tap dancers often have a strong sense of personal identity that influences their different artistic choices. The nuances of these magnetic personalities result in individual performers being able to distinguish themselves from others with signature steps, styles or attitudes. The beautiful challenge with Black vernacular forms is that no one has individual authority over a move, its style, or its progression. Anyone can learn the dance moves, and many people can execute the techniques to varying degrees of complexity and virtuosity. Innovation within the forms allowed folks to be noticed and make a mark in the history of the art form. Without ostracizing themselves from Black communities, Black women performing Jazz and Tap were required to

execute popular dance trends accurately while differentiating themselves from other demographics in ways that still fit into the aesthetic of Jazz and Tap dance in order to carve out careers. The Black women Jazz and Tap dancers deploying Black vernacular dance forms in performance, while often unrecognized, impact the socio-cultural framework of Black and American dance.

Meanwhile, inside and outside of performance, Black women artists often demonstrate political resistance and use the stage to subvert hegemonic power structures in important and unique ways (Hazzard-Gordon 1985). The remainder of this chapter prioritizes and values the political navigations and embodied knowledge of select Black women Jazz and Tap dancers using the framework of Black Feminist Thought, which aims to empower Black women by acknowledging their intersectional oppression and supporting broad principles of social justice that meet the needs of those who have been historically underserved (Collins 2000). The following Black women who influenced Jazz and Tap dance communicate their embodied knowledge in performance and dance training. They were/are all pioneers challenging injustices like segregation, racism, and sexism while compiling accolades, mentoring subsequent generations and influencing social change. Through analyzing the embodied cultural values and political rhythms of Jazz and Tap dance, the patterns between the personal and the performative become clear (McCarthy-Brown and Carter 2019). The embodied navigations of these dancers demonstrate links between thought and action that determine how they navigate their careers and relationships to the field.

Alice Whitman (1900–1969)

The Whitman Sisters were a famous Black family-run **vaudeville** troupe that played major **vaudeville** circuits in the USA in the early 1900s (George-Graves 2000). As a family, the sisters owned and produced every element of the highly successful company. The four sisters Mabel, Essie,

Alberta, and Alice were famed as "The Royalty of Negro **Vaudeville**" and used their success to innovate the performing arts, develop successful careers, and allow other Black performers to learn and perform (George-Graves 2000).

The Whitman Sisters practiced fluidity in their racial classification, often presenting themselves as White women in blonde wigs to maintain high-class status and criticize social norms (George-Graves 2000). The Whitman Sisters employed Black dancers of all complexions and executed fluidity in gender with Alberta often presenting as Bert Whitman, a cross-dressing male impersonator (George-Graves 2000). The sisters used this fluidity to their advantage and consistently navigated racial and gender boundaries to advantage themselves and those in their company. As a troupe, the Whitman Sisters garnered national acclaim by playing to Black and White audiences and utilizing Black social dances such as the **cakewalk** in their performances (George-Graves 2000).

Alice Whitman, also known as "Baby," was the youngest of the Whitman Sisters, joining the company at only ten years old. She was also one of the most prolific Black women Tap dancers of the early 20th century (George-Graves 2000). While everyone had their role in the company, Alice starred as a principal dancer in the show and received the title "The Queen of Taps" by critics who cited her as the best girl tapper in the country (George-Graves 2000). Although Alice never left the group, her individual contributions to Tap should not be ignored. She sang while performing energetic tap steps, including wings, pullbacks, and timesteps (George-Graves 2000). Further, she performed popular dances such as the **Shimmy** and Walkin' the Dog. On her own, she was a regular winner of **cakewalk** contests and garnered national success that improved the popularity of the entire **vaudeville** show (George-Graves 2000). Alice was able to capitalize on her youthful appearance and Tap prowess to present a perfect embodiment of cuteness and joy, meanwhile breaking down gender barriers by being one of the only female acts to perform *in front* of a chorus line, which was typically only done by men.

Josephine Baker (1906–1975)

Josephine Baker was a famed dancer, actress, and humanitarian who greatly impacted the history of Jazz dance. She began performing as a chorus girl with the **vaudeville** group The Dixie Steppers at age 13 (Kraut 2003). Baker stood out for her unique brand of comic relief in which she would roll her eyes, buckle her knees, and make goofy faces. She would also improvise quick steps, low kicks, and swinging arms whenever she forgot the routine. Anthea Kraut (2003) claims, "She had consequently built up a substantial repertory of moves including the **Charleston**, Black Bottom, Mess Around, **Shimmy**, Tack Annie, and not least, a distinctive knack for crossing her eyes" (437).

Her individual and dramatized social dances continued to fuel the popularity of Jazz dance in the USA and internationally, skyrocketing her career as a dancer and entertainer. Audiences adored her quirky performances, and she became the highest-paid chorus girl in **vaudeville**. She performed in the Broadway show *Shuffle Along* (1921), various Harlem theaters, and the Plantation Club in New York City. Amid her success, she was invited to star in an all-Black variety show in Paris called *La Revue Nègre* (1925) (Kraut 2003). She continued performing in Paris, dancing, singing, and acting with nicknames like "Black Venus" and "Black Pearl" until she became a movie star (Francis 2021).

Her unique dance aesthetic carried into her early film performances, including *Siren of the Tropics* (1927), *Zouzou* (1934), and *Princesse Tam-Tam* (1935). Baker's bridge between Black vernacular dance and early cinema greatly impacted popular culture (Francis 2021).

Her success as a Jazz dancer was double-edged as it led to her fame, meanwhile exploiting her exoticism for the erotic appeal. She was presented as wild and uncontrollable in her movement, layered with decadent, revealing costumes that emphasized sexy bare legs, such as her famous banana skirt (Kraut 2003). Despite the problematic nature of her

Figure 3.1 Poster of Josephine Baker advertising her performance at the Strand Theater, 1951. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. Gift from Jean-Claude Baker.

portrayal, her undeniable talent led to her success as a French movie star. Baker also supported the French Resistance in World War II. She would smuggle messages in her sheet music with invisible ink as she traveled and performed. For her bravery, Baker became the first American woman to receive full French military honors.

Despite her overt popularity in France, Baker was still met with racism from American audiences when she returned to perform in *Ziegfeld Follies*. Baker began to work as an equal rights activist (Kraut 2003). She refused to perform for segregated audiences and showed great support for the **NAACP**. Baker also participated in the March on Washington in 1963 and was the only Black woman who spoke along with Martin Luther King, Jr. Through her family, Baker demonstrated the persistence of love regardless of racial barriers, adopting twelve children from around the world and calling them her "Rainbow Tribe." She once claimed, "Surely the day will come when color means nothing more than the skin tone, when religion is seen uniquely as a way to speak one's soul, when birth places have the weight of a throw of the dice and all men are born free, when understanding breeds love and brotherhood" (Hightower 2020).

Jeni LeGon (1916–2012)

As a child, Jeni LeGon began her performance career with the Whitman Sisters. She then was able to stand out as an individual act by wearing pants, which few women wore during performances (George-Graves 2018). LeGon was one of the few Black women solo Tap dancers to receive Hollywood acclaim. She was the first Black woman to sign a contract with MGM for her talent. However, her contract was cut short due to the intersectional racism and sexism she experienced (George-Graves 2018).

Her talent and gimmick of pants gave her the ability to dance with Bill "Bojangles" Robinson in film. Although her film career was brief, she found great success on Broadway and dancing in shows internationally (George-Graves 2018). Outside of the USA, critics raved about her performances and claimed that she was a better Tap dancer than the famous White woman tapper, Eleanor Powell (George-Graves 2018). Despite many challenges, LeGon became a leading Black woman Tap performer showing excellence in technical skill and performance. In 2002, she received an honorary doctorate from Oklahoma City University (George-Graves 2018).

Figure 3.2 Bill "Bojangles" Robinson and Jeni LeGon in the motion picture *Hoorah for Love*. Photo by Robert W. Coburn, courtesy of the E. Azalia Hackley Collection of African Americans in the Performing Arts, Detroit Public Library.

Norma Miller (1919–2019)

Norma Miller was another Jazz dance phenomenon. She grew up in Harlem and lived near the famed Savoy Ballroom. At 15, she became the youngest member of Whitey's Lindy Hoppers and was a frequent dance contest winner. With the troupe, she traveled around the USA, Europe, and South

America (Katz 2019). Miller also gained critical acclaim with Whitey's Lindy Hoppers in films: *A Day at the Races* (1937) and *Hellzapoppin'* (1941). Her complex partnering was full of acrobatic tricks and flips, energetic jumps and turns, and intricate rhythmic patterns. She became known as the "Queen of **Swing**."

After performing with the Lindy Hoppers, Miller set out to create more opportunities for herself. Miller trained in the dance styles of Katherine Dunham (1909–2006) and Martha Graham (1894–1991) before beginning a career on Broadway in such productions as *Run, Little Chillun* (1943), *Swingin' The Dream* (1939), and *Lew Leslie's Blackbirds of 1939* (1939). Miller then set out on her own, becoming one of the few Black female entrepreneurs and managers in show business. She spearheaded multiple ventures for herself and others, creating the Norma Miller Dancers, a group of 14 Jazz dancing girls and boys, and Norma Miller and her Jazzmen, an all-male group (1952–1968) ("Norma Miller: The Norma Miller Dancers and The Jazzmen" 2010). In the latter years of her life, Miller traveled the world to mentor and support the **Lindy Hop** dance community (Katz 2019).

Debbie Allen (b. 1950)

Debbie Allen began her life and Jazz dance career in Houston, Texas, during the **Jim Crow** era of the 1950–60s. As a teenager, she applied to attend the Houston Ballet School. Although her performance warranted admission, the school denied her entry based on her skin color (Rasminsky 2020). Despite this discouragement, Allen continued dancing and training in Mexico with her family. In 1964, Allen reauditioned for the Houston Ballet School, who reconsidered its racist practices, and admitted Allen as the only Black female student (Rasminsky 2020). Allen attended Howard University, where she studied drama and graduated in 1971. Post-graduation, Allen starred as Anita in the Broadway revival of *West Side Story* in 1980. She then transitioned from stage to screen, gaining her breakout role as Lydia Grant, the dance instructor in the movie *Fame* (1980) and *Fame* the TV series (1982–87). Allen continued to keep

her theatrical roots alive, heading Bob Fosse's revival of the musical *Sweet Charity* in 1986, for which she was nominated for a Tony Award. Allen has received numerous awards and honors throughout her performance career, including being the United States Cultural Ambassador of Dance and receiving a Primetime Emmy Governors Award (2021).

Although Allen had a robust performance career, she is just as prolific behind the scenes, teaching, choreographing, directing, and producing for theater and television. In 2000, she founded the Debbie Allen Dance Academy where she works to make dance an accessible form of recreation for Black and Brown children in Los Angeles, California. Allen states, "When you train in dance or the performing arts period, there is a part of the education that has to do with character and humanity and creativity and thinking forward" (Shacknai 2020). She explains that her teaching philosophy is about more than steps; she works to mentor and inspire students so they can translate the skills from dance to whatever career they choose.

Dianne Walker (b. 1951)

Dianne Walker, "Lady Di," is a Tap dancer who has worked diligently to maintain the rhythmic quality of Tap while emphasizing a soft delicate articulation of sound. Walker also takes great pride in mentoring the next generation of Tap leaders (Hill 2010). Brian Seibert (n.d.) claims, "She did not have a company of her own and was not a member of one. She did not choreograph. She lived with her family in Boston, not New York. But Walker was nevertheless a pillar of the tap community: a teacher, a role model, and, always, a mighty fine dancer."

Walker began studying Tap at the age of seven under Mildred Kennedy, "The Brown Bomber," a successful **vaudeville** performer in New England and New York. Walker also became a mentee of Leon Collins (1922–1985). She often taught children's classes for Collins to afford advanced lessons with him. While performing with Collins, she was the only Black woman in the group and sometimes only featured in

post-show jam sessions. Walker received her first traditional Tap dance job as a chorus girl in Broadway's *Black and Blue* (1989) at the age of 32. She prepared fiercely for the role and later became the assistant choreographer. Throughout the run, Walker was the only woman Hoofer and danced amongst the male tap legends like Jimmy Slyde, Bunny Briggs, and Ralph Brown. Walker was also one of few women to appear in Gregory Hines's film *Tap* (1989). Walker was a trailblazer who emphasized her femininity and sophistication without relying on cuteness or overt sexuality within her tapping (Hill 2010). Walker developed a signature tap style with lifted weight and delicate steps combined with advanced rhythmic patterns, which gave her a style that some would describe as distinctly feminine ("Dianne 'Lady Di' Walker").

Walker's most significant impact on Tap is as a mentor and educator. She co-hosted a Jazz Tap Residency Project with Jimmy Slyde (1927–2008) in Massachusetts and has frequently taught classes and workshops with dancers from around the country. She has trained dancers who are setting the pace for Tap in the 21st century, like Derick Grant, Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards, and Savion Glover. She has become lovingly known as "Aunty Dianne" in the field (Hill 2010).

Melanie George (b. 1972)

Melanie George is a leading dance educator shaping the way concert jazz is studied and disseminated in the United States (Mosley 2021). Over the years, George has become a force in the Jazz dance community and was a major contributor to the Jazz dance documentary *Uprooted: The Journey of Jazz* (2020). This film featured interviews with several Jazz dance influencers, but, arguably, few stole the show and laid out the complex race-conscious history like Melanie George. Her performance in *Uprooted* is but one element within her three-pronged approach of pedagogy, choreography, and research. Through this personal and professional trifecta, she is consciously shaping Jazz dance lineage and correcting the historical record to include those contributors who have been omitted due to racism.

Figure 3.3 Melanie George. Photo by JD Urban.

George has built a substantial career in dance by presenting at conferences and teaching in multiple locations including being the former director of dance at American University and a co-curator at Jacob's Pillow (Mosley 2021). Her choreography, dramaturgy, and written scholarship have

advanced 21st century Jazz dance research while garnering national acclaim from several organizations, including the National Dance Education Organization. Melanie George (n.d.) fosters what she calls a neo-Jazz aesthetic, which she defines as "a historically informed jazz style; rhythmic, weighted, and vernacular. Neo-Jazz aims to unseat the privilege of Eurocentric dominance in contemporary jazz dance."

George founded the *Jazz Is… Dance Project*, an organization centering on Jazz dance within the education system, concert stage, and traditional scholarship (Mosley 2021). George (n.d.) explains, "Jazz Is… Dance Project values improvisation, stylization, and humanity in jazz dance." The organization works to increase the visibility of Jazz dance and unearth the true foundations of the form.

Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards (b. 1976)

Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards is another child protégé who has expanded the role of women in Tap. At 12 years old, she performed in the Broadway show *Black and Blue* with Savion Glover but was often overshadowed by him (Hill 2010). Sumbry-Edwards was the first woman to join Glover's all-male Broadway cast of *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk*. She performed all of the hard-hitting male steps of her male predecessors, but for some numbers she wore heeled tap shoes. Therefore, she executed the same hard-hitting rhythmic intricacies as the men, but in a feminized shoe.

Sumbry-Edwards often performs and teaches in heels to intentionally emphasize a female-centered sensuality within the genre. She has taught "Mastering Femininity in Tap" classes in which her technique of tapping in heels was developed and disseminated (Hill 2010). Her technique utilizes syncopation, versatility in weight distribution, control, attack, and circular or spiraled momentum. Through this technique, hoofing in heels became a new orientation in which rotation became the primary way to access a dancer's entire kinesphere (Hill 2010).

Although Sumbry-Edwards' career has existed somewhat outside of the limelight, her influence can be seen in pop culture and concert dance. She was the Tap dance teacher to Michael Jackson and is the current Tap advisor for *Dance Magazine*. She continues to teach, choreograph, and perform, shaping Tap in the USA.

Chloe Arnold (b. 1980)

Chloe Arnold is an Emmy-nominated Tap dancer and choreographer from Washington D.C. She began Tap dancing at the age of six as the only Black student at the Wheaton Studio of Dance in Silver Spring, Maryland. She continued to advance as a young prodigy joining the National Tap Ensemble's junior company Flying Feet, performing in Frank Hatchet's Olympic Fever Showcase, and the all-Black female company Taps & Company in her youth. She cross-trained in other dance forms, including Modern, Jazz, and Ballet. As a young performer, she traveled and danced with other Tap masters like Eddie Brown, Harriet Brown, LaVaughan Robinson, Dorothy Wassermann, Savion Glover, Barbara Duffy, Toni Lombre, and Jason Samuels Smith (Hill 2010).

While attending Columbia University, Arnold danced in the musical *Soul Possessed,* directed by Debbie Allen who mentored Arnold and inspired her to continue her Tap career and to create her signature style of Tap that embraces a multicultural, Black feminist perspective through its performers, choreography, and community engagement work. In 2003, Chloe founded Syncopated Ladies, an all-women Tap dance company that bridges the gap between concert and commercial dance. Chloe and her younger sister Maud Arnold work in tandem as dancers and business partners to influence the company's direction. As a duo, they use Tap as a way to honor the Black vernacular roots of Tap and seek to elevate it by placing it at the center of their work. The sisters and their company perform in various venues, including online videos, art museums, television shows, and product launches (Pilla 2020). They work to create a youthful, engaging, and

approachable style of Tap dance to connect and empower various communities.

The Syncopated Ladies use **rhythm tap** to show a full picture of women as human and resist the limiting tropes of a chorus line. Instead of playing into the male gaze, Chloe Arnold and the Syncopated Ladies center the experiences and perspectives of marginalized women as they oscillate between smiling joyous performances and serious high-pressure numbers (Kane 2016). Arnold (2019) claims, "I loved being aggressive, and that transferred into my tap dancing. At the same time, I'm feminine and like to feel sexy. I like to be able to express different moves, to be hard core with a touch." The Syncopated Ladies often perform on small wooden boards in various venues that reinforce and emphasize their rhythmic sounds. Their intense rhythmic mastery is layered with instances of softness and sensual movement, free-flowing hair, emotional facial expressions, and an external focus on the audience. The performance of this paradox between the rhythmic hoofing of the 20th to 21st-century feminist ideals creates an exciting entry point for women of color and anyone else who hasn't been included in Tap in the past.

Further, Arnold and the Syncopated Ladies are using Tap as art activism. Through the company and its performances, they foster the future of women in Tap by uplifting women of diverse backgrounds and hosting community classes that make learning Tap accessible. Chloe and Maud also established the Chloe & Maud Foundation, which provides Black children with quality education and empowerment in dance and entrepreneurship.

★★★

When learning about Jazz and Tap dance, White male contributors often take center stage. The Black women discussed in this chapter serve as a diverse collection of Jazz and Tap dance influencers, using their bodies and careers to resist the White patriarchal hegemony that minimizes Black women. However, the women in this chapter are not

the only Black women who have kept the tempo of the art forms. Katherine Dunham, particularly, is a notable contributor, who worked largely in Modern dance but with strong Jazz influences. (See Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7). This chapter serves as one counter-narrative that promotes the continuous investigation into Black women in dance.

The goal is not for this list of Black women to become a new canon, but instead, provide an example of an analysis that privileges both the dance forms and the navigation of oppression. Many Black dance scholars, such as Kariamu Welsh, Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Nadine George-Graves, Thomas DeFrantz, Takiyah Nur Amin, Nyama McCarthy-Brown, and Melanie George have worked to identify and uplift Black aesthetics and the contributions of Black dancers throughout the **African Diaspora** and make further scholarship possible. More meticulous research is needed in every dance genre to uncover how exclusion is enacted and reinforced in the field and in the body. Only then can dance ancestors whose labor has been invisibilized be honored (Gottschild 1998). To accurately understand dance in US culture, the navigation, creative practices, techniques, career paths, and embodied politics of the marginalized must be studied. Unless we challenge those who continue to view dance history solely or primarily through a White patriarchal lens, only one pulse of the polyrhythmic symphony of American dance will ever be revealed.

Note: Thank You to Dr. Nadine George-Graves for her editorial oversight and mentorship of this chapter.

FURTHER READING LIST

Books

Brown, Jayna. 2008. *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Brown provides a cultural history of Black women show girls in America from 1890 to 1945. Brown connects the dance innovations of Black performers to the shifting perceptions of modern womanhood and popular culture.

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This anthology of African American dance explores the theory, history, and practices of African Americans in dance.

Hazzard-Gordon, Katrina. 2010. *Jookin': the Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture*. Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press.

This book focuses on the underground Black working class American subculture that developed jook joints. Hazzard-Gordon uses social dance to connect African slaves to the free Blacks of the **Reconstruction** Era.

Articles/Chapters

Corbett, Saroya. 2014. "Katherine Dunham's Mark on Jazz Dance" in *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches* edited by Lindsay Guarino and Wendy Oliver. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.

Corbett's chapter connects the Modern dance icon, Katherine Dunham, to Jazz dance history and highlights the technique of "Dunham Jazz."

Dixon, Brenda. 1990. "Black Dance and Dancers and the White Public: A Prolegomenon to Problems of Definition." *Black American Literature Forums*, vol. 24, no. 1: 117–123.

In this chapter, Dixon interrogates issues that arise when Black dancers and companies, specifically Dance Theater of Harlem and Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, interact with the White public.

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In this chapter, Thomas investigates the controversy within Tap dance history. Thomas analyzes Tap dance as soundwork that can begin to dismantle systemic racism.

Films/Videos

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This sound recording features Brenda Bufalino interviewing Mable Lee who was known as "Queen of the Soundies" for her successful performing career from the 1940s to the 1980s.

Casel, Ayodele. 2017. "Ayodele Casel - "While I Have The Floor." https://youtu.be/xyeuvqUd6jo

This video features a Tap and spoken word performance by Black and Puerto Rican dancer Ayodele Casel. Casel provides a brief background into her own dance history then honors other Black women tap dancers who have largely been erased from history.

Dornfeld, Barry, Debora Kodish and Germaine Ingram, directors. 2004. *Plenty of Good Women Dancers*. Philadelphia Folklore Project, distributors. www.folkstreams.net/films/plenty-of-good-women-dancers

This documentary features prominent Black women Tap dancers from Philadelphia in the 1920s to 1950s.

Morgan, Danielle, interviewer. 2021. "A Conversation with the First Black Rockette." The Rockettes. https://youtu.be/oR3gQYt6Eug

This is a video interview with Jennifer Jones, the first Black Rockette in 1987.

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