

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: *FREEDOM'S CADENCE: RHYTHM AS A PRACTICE OF FREEDOM, ESTABLISHMENT OF COMMUNITY, AND A CONDUIT OF HOPE*

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Abstract: *Freedom's Cadence* seeks to investigate the overlapping pulse in Black expression that exposes transcendent qualities in Black dance, music, and visual art, championing embodied spirituality. Ultimately guided by the question, what is the role of rhythm in Black dance as it relates to redefining and reimagining black identity? Starting from an orthodox understanding of rhythm, Black music traditions became the foundation of this research and the resulting performance. Specifically, this paper examines Negro spirituals, blues, and House music. The structure of Black music is used to reveal what lies deep inside the expression of Black American culture, further analyzing Black Southern Baptist churches, jook joints, and House clubs as sacred spaces. The resulting dissonance, dysfluency, and disruption found in Black musical loops and movement make clear the importance of rhythm in Black lives. Allowing it to function as a practice of freedom, establishment of community, and a conduit of hope.

*FREEDOM'S CADENCE: RHYTHM AS A PRACTICE OF FREEDOM, ESTABLISHMENT
OF COMMUNITY, AND A CONDUIT OF HOPE*

by

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OVERLAPPING PULSE: An Introduction

“I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark yeeeeeoww! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way. My face is painted red and yellow and my body is painted blue. My pulse is throbbing like a war drum. I want to slaughter something—give pain, give death to what, I do not know. But the piece ends. The men of the orchestra wipe their lips and rest their fingers. I creep back slowly to the veneer we call civilization with the last tone and find the white friend sitting motionless in his seat, smoking calmly.”¹ – Zora Neale Hurston (1928)

As a high school student, I read Zora Neale Hurston's essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me,” written in 1928. I am grateful to Mr. Freeburger (now Dr. Freeburger) for pushing the boundaries of high school literature and introducing me to one of the greatest scholars of American folklore. In one part of this essay, shown above, Hurston describes an experience of a black woman sitting in a jazz club with her white friend. The essay illuminates a common moment in the black experience: a hyperawareness of one's Blackness while in an ordinary social situation. Never had I read something that filled me with such a sense of belonging. Hurston spoke to an experience I thought I was strange to feel; a connection to ancestors I never knew, urging me to dance, but most importantly, transcendence in time to a life that existed beyond my reality.

Though I cannot remember the first time I became aware of my Blackness, reading this was the moment I realized my questions of culture and identity were not unique. I've always *felt* my Blackness, though unable to articulate how it belonged to me. Caught in the naive whirlwind of black Americans tracing their lineage by geographic location, I thought I would find the answer to all my questions. Buried in this search for my heritage was the quiet shame of being truly Black; a lineage that I could not trace far from the United States, and DNA that held more

¹West, Genevieve, and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds. “How It Feels to Be Colored Me.” In *You Don't Know Us Negroes and Other Essays*, by Zora Neale Hurston. HarperCollins Publishers, 2022.

complexities than answers. When I would ask about my family's heritage, my Daddy would say to me lovingly, "You're a mutt." *He was right*. A key notion that I misunderstood was the distinction between race, heritage, and culture. In my search, I found the opportunity to shed this quiet shame and dive into the beauty of holding all the complexities of being Black. I quickly learned that my Blackness exists beyond a geographical location or physical description and found comfort in the manifestation of African diasporic dance.

Diasporic dance is not only a comfort in my life but, along with Black musical traditions, is a centerpiece of Black experience and foundational to my thesis research. My thesis presentation, entitled *Freedom's Cadence*, began as an exploration of joy. From my experience in liturgical dancing in church, to line dances at many family reunions, to the late-night dancing to House mixes at a club, there is a vibrational tone that has carried the spirit of community in Black culture throughout generations. "I get the same feeling dancing at a club as I do in church."² What I often feel can be described as spiritual. Movement becomes a language of connection and a collective memory. My thesis seeks to investigate the overlapping pulse in Black expression that exposes these transcendent qualities in Black dance, music, and visual art. This paper does not assume that the Black experience is a monolith producing indistinguishable dances but acknowledges the remnants of history that live within these dances. To narrow the scope of this research, I explored Black dance through the lens of Black American culture. It is important that I first intentionally *map* what it means to have a black body.

Black, first, is a color. Dictionaries also recognize it as a categorization of humans with dark-colored skin. This definition arises within the concept of the African diaspora, which includes African peoples and their descendants who have been spread across the world through

²This quote I heard while taking a Caribbean Dancehall class in college.

voluntary or involuntary migration.³ Alongside these definitions are others attached to everyday societal uses of the word: dirty or soiled, characterized by the absence of light, indicative of condemnation or discredit, and the opposite of white.⁴ *Maybe this is how I developed my shame.* All are definitions of black that I am familiar with, but none of them represent the Black I know. They do not hold space for the *yeeeeooww!* that my Blackness embraces. Like Hurston's character in this scene, I am enamored with the moments when I can revel in my Blackness. "When I do this, I just feel Black."⁵

Like demonstrated in the sentence above, I am choosing to capitalize the word "black" when referencing a representation of culture rather than just a phenotypic description. This differentiation appears throughout my written thesis. Its capitalization recognizes the complexity and transnational significance of the culture, while the lowercase establishes its connection to physical racialization placed on a group of people by the dominant white minority.⁶ The word *black* is associated with people whose culture developed under unique circumstances: considered anti-human, with their bodies deemed property to be claimed. Capitalization of *Black* reclaims the meaning of the word outside of its anti-black definitions.

Use of the phrase "involuntary migration" in the definition of the word black is a light way to describe the cruel commodification of black bodies in the Western hemisphere. The United States, especially, has a long and perverted history of crimes against the black body. Before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, enslaved Africans and Black Americans in the United States were deemed property. That is over 200 years of the institution of

³Harris, J. E. "The African Diaspora". United States: University of Texas at Arlington, 1996.

⁴Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Definition of black. In Merriam-Webster.com dictionary. Retrieved April 2026, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/black>

⁵I overheard this in a tap class and then again in a hip hop class from someone different.

⁶Davis, C. U., Carter, S., & Koff, S. R. (2023). *Troubling the Frame: Laban Movement Analysis as Critical Dialogue*. Journal of Dance Education, 23(4), 320–328. (Reference to Brenda Dixon Gottschild)

slavery in the United States since its genesis in 1619. However, these ideologies were not born in North America; the United States simply perfected the use of anti-black propaganda and black bodies to build the country into an economic and military superpower. Black bodies were subjected to inhumane forced labor, sexual abuse, and other barbaric punishments for the condition of having skin that was too dark, systematically justified by racist ideologies. Though news of this 1863 proclamation and its promise of freedom would not reach most enslaved people on Confederate plantations until a year and a half later, this decree signified a systemic change in the physical identity of black people. It set a precedent for the black body's radical societal transformation from property to person. Unfortunately, even after this government proclamation, Black Americans faced persecution throughout the Reconstruction and Jim Crow eras. The transatlantic slave trade had already damaged the narrative of the black body to a degree that the Emancipation Proclamation did not reverse. Anti-black narratives were the justification to treat black people as objects and closely monitor their movement.

It is reasonable to believe that the historical narrative of the black body has affected how its movements (figurative and literal) are interpreted by society today. Jasmine Johnson, whose work examines the politics of Black movement, states, "Black dance is both an aesthetic and historical category [where] over time the term 'Black dance' has come to encompass both vernacular (social) and theatrical (stage) dance created by African-descended peoples in the United States and around the world."⁷ This definition of Black dance speaks to Black as a global culture, but more importantly, acknowledges a complex weave of historical embodied experience that has birthed these dances. It is curious that the traumatic involuntary movement of distant

⁷Jasmine Johnson, "Black Dance," *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism*, January 10, 2017.

ancestors' bodies, through the transatlantic slave trade, would, generations later, find me with the freedom to investigate the movements of my own body in my thesis research.

Dance is an art form in which the artist and art cannot be separated therefore, I must address my movement history to understand my present.⁸ Whether intentional or subconsciously, an artist's experiences are present in the product of their creative process. Black people have innovated beyond expectations. Overcoming constituted hurdles to establish themselves as embodied individuals. In *I Want to be Ready*, Danielle Goldman argues that "one's social and historical positions in the world affect one's ability to move [...]"⁹ Goldman uses the term "tight spaces" to refer to any constrictions or limitations present that may affect that mobility. In my thesis research, I explored the "tight space" Black Americans have been put in, which resulted in the emergence of dances that are now the epicenter of American culture. They permeate the Eurocentric boundaries constructed by an anti-black society, initiated by the physical enslavement of their ancestors' black bodies.¹⁰ Creators of these vernacular dances lived outside of the normative boundaries of a Eurocentrically constructed society; therefore, diasporic dances are not fully appreciated through those ideologies.

The permeation through these metaphorical spaces exposes aesthetic markers of stylization indicative of diasporic histories. Brenda Dixon Gottschild, dance scholar and author of *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*, documents how anti-black ideologies have impacted perceptions of the black body in dance.¹¹ She utilizes interviews with major dance figures as references for her research. As an expert in the perception of black bodies

⁸Gottschild, pg.11

⁹Goldman, D. (2010). *I Want to Be Ready : Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*. Ann Arbor, Michigan. University of Michigan Press.

¹⁰DeFrantz, T. F. (2001). "Foreword." In D. Fischer-Horung & A. D. Goeller (Eds.), *EmBodying Liberation: The Black body in American Dance* (Vol. 4). LitVerlag Hamburg.

¹¹Gottschild, B. D. (2005). *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (1st Edition). Palgrave Macmillan.

on a concert stage, Gottschild identifies five principles of Africanist aesthetics, which refer to concepts, practices, attitudes, and forms rooted in Africa or African culture: Embracing the Conflict, Polycentrism/Polyrhythm, High-affect Juxtaposition, Ephebism, and The Aesthetic of the Cool.¹² She uses these aesthetics as a basis for reclaiming the influence of Black people and their bodies on American culture. The identification of these aesthetics was groundbreaking for the study of black bodies in concert dance, but it does not satisfy what lives deep in the performance of these dances.

To further understand how Black dance is centered in the Black experience, I am analyzing aesthetics, expression, and performance as entities that operate synergistically. Experiences of the individual determine the content that is being expressed or realized in society, intrinsic desires are actualized. Moreover, the need for expression, the choices and reasons behind creation, is what brings about these aesthetics. Synthesis of expression and aesthetics then manifests as performance. For my research, I am thinking about performance as expressly created for the witnessing of others and tied to live expressive states. It is dynamic. It is nuanced. It is ephemeral. As the performance is witnessed, the work's aesthetics can be identified/categorized, reestablishing the cycle.

This cycle of expression and performance are deeply tied to culture. “Teach the culture first, and the movement will always follow.”¹³ Alternatively, aesthetic choices are a stylistic characteristic that can be identified and added superficially. In “Stripping the Emperor: The Africanist Presence in American Concert Dance,” Gottschild confronts America’s glorification of George Balanchine. Balanchine is recognized for his balletic style and “cutting-edge”

¹²Gotschild, B. D. “Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance : Dance and Other Contexts.” of Contributions in *Afro-American and African Studies*, No. 179. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996.

¹³Heard this while in a West African dance class.

choreography. Gottschild credits Balanchine's stylistic choice to the influence of the Africanist Aesthetic. His introduction of articulated torsos and nontraditional timing was new to the world of ballet while already existing in Black dance spaces.¹⁴ These aesthetics were placed on top of stories told by a white, male voice. Balanchine did not "steal" this aesthetic; rather silenced black voices by disregarding their influence. This is a common practice in dance and music, as seen in examples like rock n' roll (Elvis Presley) and jazz dance (Bob Fosse)—black sentiments under the guise of white faces. These are instances in which Blackness manifests visually while disconnected from the culture. What I am researching is the feeling that exists in Black dance beyond visual representation.

Unexpectedly, I found these phrases vital to this research, and they continue to frame my perception of Black dance:

"I get the same feeling dancing at a club as I do in *church*."

"This is the way I teach: teach the culture first and *the movement* will always follow."

"When I do this, I just *feel* Black."¹⁵

Originating from different voices and moments in my life, they serve as a reminder that the movement was not formed in isolation but rather functioned as an indication of the rhythm of life for Black Americans. As I expand my understanding of performance, there is a textural component that exists in Black dance that is exposed by the sonic underpinnings of Black music. The cadence of the movement takes the forefront as the element that helps to secure a dance within the spirit of the diaspora. In my thesis research and the resulting performance, *Freedom's Cadence*, I am grounded by the question, what is the role of rhythm in Black dance as it relates to redefining and reimagining black identity? I aim to explore the ability of rhythmic play to

¹⁴Gottschild, 1998

¹⁵Phrases I overheard in dance classes that deeply resonated with me.

translate human experience and serve as a foundation for storytelling, specifically in relationship to Black musical traditions. My exploration of rhythm is not limited to the auditory conception. Instead, I am expanding the definition of rhythm to a visual landscape. Rhythm in dance exists as the “spaces” between movements, not always connected to music; pauses and choices of *when to move* create cadence, as it does in speech. This concept of rhythm will be expanded in the following chapters. First, I want to frame the necessity of autonomy over movement and rhythm in Black American life and culture.

FREEDOM'S PRINCIPLES: What is freedom for black bodies?

Recognizing that black bodies hold a narrative propagated by anti-black rhetoric in the United States puts into perspective the intricacies of discussing the freedom of movement for those same bodies. In what ways did these historical precedents shift black people's mind-body connection, prompting the need to engage in unique forms of movement? For example, the South Carolina 1740 Slave Code prohibited enslaved people from moving freely on and between plantations, assembling in groups, and using drums.¹⁶ It also gave white slave masters the authority to kill enslaved Africans and Black Americans as necessary punishment for rebellion, and it revoked all civil rights for black bodies.¹⁷ This code became the model for other states' legislatures to maintain control over enslaved populations. Revoking the use of drums created a need to communicate with each other using their bodies as a tool to make rhythms; remaining silent meant giving in. Silence meant death. Motivation to move outside of these prescriptive orders had to be deep-seated in their psyche. Restriction of literal movement through social and political policies changes the impact of the development of Black American vernacular dances. I am not interested in presenting trauma as spectacle but rather repositioning joy as survival. I am seeking to uncover the implications of moving a black body in an anti-black racist society. This chapter will consider the ways dance lends itself to the survival of black people in the face of bodily oppression, by creating new identities.

New Identities Through Movement

When the physical body is both the reason for affliction and subjected to the weight of brutality, one's understanding of self becomes distorted. In the face of extreme violence,

¹⁶Keyser, R. (2020). Ch. 1.1. "Primary Source: The South Carolina Slave Code, 1740." In C. Nelson (Ed.), *American Legal History to the 1860s*. University of Wisconsin-Madison. Teaching American History in South Carolina.

¹⁷Keyser, Ch 1.1.

enslaved peoples sought ways to resist and redress their being. Clinton Hutton, an expert on Caribbean political philosophy, examines the socio-political constructs that have shaped the aesthetics of Black dance. Hutton's article, *The Creative Ethos of the African Diaspora*, dissects how these Black aesthetics represent a fight for identity. This study starts with the life of enslaved Africans from the Transatlantic slave trade, as previously mentioned, a vital juncture in the creation of the African diaspora. Hutton argues that the enslaved "coped with and resisted slavery and fashioned their being...by embracing/becoming one personality and agency above any other, the artist."¹⁸ An artist lives through their imagination. There is no corporeal limit to which one must abide inside of imagination. Enslaved peoples would physically embody being "gods, kings, queens, sovereigns and free persons."¹⁹ Engaging in dance as an exploratory practice of physical autonomy became a necessary revitalizing ritual. This included resisting the aforementioned Slave Code by turning their bodies into musical instruments in practices like Juba, rhythmically relating with each other.²⁰ Musicologist Dena J. Epstein details archival material that talks about the rhythmical complexity of Juba from the perspective of poets who recognize patterns and cadence:

"They are more to my ear like that marvelous performance-clapping Juba, than anything else. The beat is capriciously irregular; there is no attempt to keep time to all the notes, but then it comes so pat & so distinct that the cadence is never lost such irregularities are like rests and grace notes. They must be so managed as neither to hasten or retard the beat."²¹ – Beverly Tucker to Edgar Allen Poe (1835)

¹⁸Hutton, Clinton. "The Creative Ethos of the African Diaspora: Performance Aesthetics and the Fight for Freedom and Identity." *Caribbean Quarterly* 53, no. 1-2 (2007.): 127–49.

¹⁹Hutton, p. 131

²⁰Epstein, Dena J. "Slave Music in the United States before 1860: A Survey of Sources (Part 2)." *Notes*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1963, pp. 377–90.

²¹"Letters of Poe and His Friends," *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by James A. Harrison. New York, G. D. Sproul, 1902, Vol. 17, p. 22. Quote from Epstein article, who cites Harrison

“The cadence is never lost.” This idea of disfluency and disruption in rhythm that appears in Black music and dance will be further dissected in the next chapter. Juba was perfected by the enslaved being in community, outside of prying eyes.

Enslaved peoples would secretly commune in dark spaces to witness one another’s new dancing bodies. Not only would this be a self-centering, self-indulging practice, but it would also unite them as people who were forcefully separated from their families and familiar faces. Analysis by Saidiya Hartman supports Hutton’s assertion on their embodied explorations of self-actualization. In her book *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman looks at the ways black identity has been shaped through resistance from forms of domination that usually go undetected.²² This includes the stripping of humanity, positioning them as the converse of whiteness. The quasi-performance, described by Hutton, was a “convergence of terror and enjoyment,” an improvisational act of pleasure that subverts white systems of subjugation.²³ The enslaved understood they may be risking their lives to feel fleeting moments of bodily agency. I’m moved by the idea of this rhythmic resistance as a catalyst to expose possibilities. They were not only fashioning new selves but witnessing all the possibilities of *free* in others. I am reminded of the discussion of identity found in the House dance documentary entitled *Check Your Body at the Door*.²⁴

Check Your Body at the Door is a 2011 documentary that briefly follows the lives of House dancers who share their experiences in underground clubs. The House dancers describe keeping their two “lives” purposefully separate. During the day, they are laden to society,

²²Hartman, S. V. (1997). *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. Oxford University Press.

²³Goldman, pg. 7. Quoting Hartman in the introduction of *I Want to Be Ready*

²⁴House dance is a style under the umbrella of Hip Hop.

mundane like everyone else, but at night, when they dance, they become *other*. “Some of them I don’t even know their names,” recalls dancer Archie Burnett, a major contributor to the film. What was shown on the dance floor was monumental because it was their chosen identity. Their lives outside of that dark communal space were peripheral and extraneous. Willi Ninja, House dancer and the godfather of vogue, affirms Burnett’s statement with his own: “Dance is not just moving your body, it’s bringing your inner spirit out and letting everybody else enjoy it with you.”²⁵

These House dancers transform from having no identity, being invisible, to knowing any identity. *Gods, kings, queens, sovereigns*. Along with these recollections of a “lifted” spirit are stories of the unknown horrors that may lurk outside of the club walls. Some of their dancing friends go “Missing in Action” due to death by violence, disease, or struggles with drug addiction. Inside the walls of these underground clubs was not an escape; they were not free from their affliction, but instead, it was a space of possibilities for freedom. Fleeting moments to hold total agency over their lives. The parallels between Hutton’s analysis of dance rituals of the enslaved and the embodied experience of these House dancers reciprocate dance as a practice of freedom. It strengthens Black dance as a holder of deep historical knowledge and the necessity for the black community to use movement as the vehicle to assert one’s identity.

Black Existentialism

As time presses on, and society arrives in a post-antebellum world, how does a population come to terms with being caricatures of evil and sexualized objectification? American society, from the conceptualization of black people on this soil, has told black people *what* they are, neglecting the presence of *who* they are. This is even seen in the present day, with

²⁵Sommer, S. R., Burnett, A., Green, B., Herrera, I., LaFortune, B., Moon, A., Ninja, W., et al. “Check Your Body at the Door.” Tendu TV, Inc, 2011. <http://digital.films.com/PortalPlaylists.aspx?aid=13753&xtid=75362>.

descriptions of black men as “dangerous thugs” in news reports, with their white counterparts painted as “misguided” or “mentally ill” sons.²⁶ One description dehumanizes the subject, while the other champions grace for white bodies. Fragmentation becomes heavily present in the lives of Black Americans as a result of the society around them characterizing their experience for them, built on anti-black principles. Division of the lived experience from its owner’s lived body creates a deeper distortion of self. This quickly becomes existential conversations about the definition of “self,” questions of what it means to be alive.

The term existential comes from the theory of existentialism, a philosophy in which existence is based on the individual's relationship to others and their understanding of the world. Rooted in the 19th century, this theory is derived from German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's contemplation of the values of society and its significance to human existence. In this philosophy, the concept of existence is ever-changing. Two pillars of the philosophy are important for this research: (1) the notion that there is no absolute or objective truth, but rather multiple perspectives on reality, and (2) the hypothesis that all existence recurs infinitely.²⁷ These theories are considered the beginning of existentialism, challenging others to examine how they are choosing their values, and most importantly, why. In existentialism human beings define themselves.

Existentialism is also deeply tied to naming, characterization, and categorization.²⁸ Once an object is given a name, it has been brought into existence. *black*. All objects have been named based on the predetermined characteristics placed on the original object. This phenomenon is as

²⁶Bridges T, Tober TL, Brazzell M, Chatterjee M. “Husband, father, coward, killer: The discursive reproduction of racial inequality in media accounts of mass shooters.” *Front Psychol*. 2022 Sep 29;13:966980. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.966980. PMID: 36248468; PMCID: PMC9557287

²⁷Aho, K., "Existentialism." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2025 Edition). Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (editors). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/existentialism/>.

²⁸Jean-Paul Sartre’s “Existentialism is Humanism”

follows: a sheet of paper is no longer paper if you burn it, then it becomes ashes; tables and chairs both have legs, but we do not call them the same thing. There is power in the naming of people and objects, and in the categorizing and separation of concepts in society.

The black body does not have the same privileges as a white one due to the negative association with the word black in this categorization. It is not solely responsible for perspective placed upon it by white society. Unfortunately, Nietzsche, in many essays, named certain cultural groups as superior to others, even stating Africans (and their descendants) were less sensitive to pain than Europeans, further upholding the institution of slavery.²⁹ He proves that the racialization of the black body gave it a name that it must fight to strip. Giving oneself a new name and body in front of the community requires vulnerability and a mutual understanding of the structures being resisted. Becoming Gods, kings, queens, and sovereigns. As a counterpoint, Black Existentialism offers a perspective that fully affirms the reality of Black Americans and contours the journey of questioning the values of an often-anti-black society.

In his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois introduced the theory of double consciousness, which is based on his observations of how white societal values affect the black psyche. Du Bois defines this phenomenon as black Americans' struggle to remain true to Black culture while simultaneously conforming to the ideals of a dominant white world.³⁰ He highlights the psychological torment and physiological experience of Black Americans after the Emancipation Proclamation. Although his book and theory predate the Harlem Renaissance, they became the inspiration for Black Existentialism and defined the enlightenment of the era, along with Alain Locke's "New Negro." Musician and contemporary scholar of black philosophy,

²⁹Preston, W. A., "Nietzsche on Blacks." *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. Lewis Gordon (New York: Routledge, 1997), 167–72.

³⁰Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963. *The Souls of Black Folk; Essays and Sketches*. Chicago, A. G. McClurg, 1903. New York :Johnson Reprint Corp., 1968.

Lewis R. Gordon, echoes Du Bois's notion of dichotomy when theorizing black invisibility.

Gordon positions the black body as being a "form of absence of human presence" when inside an anti-black world. Foremost is the description of invisibility and anonymity placed upon the black body by society.³¹

[...] the black body does not live on the symbolic level in an anti-black world. It is locked in the serious, material values of the real. Thus, whereas the white body can live a symbolic alienation rich with neurotic content and thereby serving as a foundation for psychoanalysis, the black body [...] always stands for "what it is" — *the black*.³² - Gordon (1997)

Cursory views of the black body in society have invisibilized black peoples' lived experiences.

The threat of death for the black body is both *literal* and *social*. Black people have lived as representatives of the concept of what it means to be black, rather than living as individuals whose lives are reflective of their own choices. A distorted narrative is given to black people about who they are that is often contradictory to what their bodies have experienced; their lived experience becomes a delusion. The specificity of the black body's servitude to subjectivity, thrust upon it by white society, sheds light on the importance of embodied experience in many African diasporic cultures. Dance allows black people to rectify their lived experience as individuals. Furthermore, Black American expressive culture can be linked to their need to diverge from white societal expectations.

The beginning of Du Bois's entry into expressive culture is his essay "The social origins of American Negro art" (1925). He describes this new art as "built on the sorrow and strain inherent in American slavery, on the difficulties that sprang from Emancipation," powered by "revenge, despair, aspirations, and hatred," deemed a part of Black Americans' fight to separate

³¹Gordon, L. R. "Existential Dynamics of Theorizing Black Invisibility." In *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 1997. P. 74

³²Gordon, p.75

themselves from the narrative of slavery.³³ This dissection of Black art brings to attention the ideas behind the sensibilities of Black creatives. In “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926), Du Bois dives deeper into the unique positionality of Black artists. He states that “until the art of black folk compels recognition, they will not be rated as human.”³⁴ Art expression, according to Du Bois, is not only linked to the implied intelligence of the human but also acknowledges the materiality of the human experience. Humanism and self-expression through art are inextricably linked; one cannot exist without the other. Art making is a societal assertion of one's being. Though Du Bois did not view dance as a viable part of the elevation of black people due to its complicated association with minstrel shows, he believed in the power of the Black experience to produce unique forms of art. Like Hurston and many other black scholars, Du Bois saw negro spirituals as a reflection of that creative power. Later in this paper, I will expound on the essentiality of spirituals for the Black experience in the past, present, and future, and their role in my thesis presentation. Spirituals are a constant in the shifting world of the Black American experience.

The black experience in the United States often exists in an awareness and shifting between the experience of self and the perception of others. Fragmentation breeds abstraction: abstraction presents itself in art as the idea of trying to reunite these shattered perceptions. The result is innovative approaches to creation. Art making is self-making. In creating my thesis presentation, I also extrapolate the fragmentation of visual artworks to find renewed cadence in the movement vocabulary for the work. On April 16, 2024, as a roundtable discussion speaker at the Grey Art Museum (NYU) on Black abstraction art, Gordon denotes that all existentialism focuses on the human condition: “All existentialism culminates in a discussion of freedom; art is

³³Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963. “The Social Origins of American Negro Art,” ca. November 1925. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

³⁴Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt), “Criteria of Negro Art,” in *Double-Take : A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, ed. Venetria K Patton, and Maureen Honey (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 47–51.

a central condition of human reality.” What is more abstract than working through these ideas with the body? Through this idiosyncratic point of view, the existentialism within Black dance should be contextualized within the lives and culture of black people. Grappling with these multiple “realities” and exploring the edges of infinity through movement.

The Black in Modern Dance

At the beginning of Sondra Fraleigh’s *Dance and the Lived Body* (1996), the Introduction analyzes her experience of existentialism in modern dance. There are two points Fraleigh mentions that caught my interest: (1) Her admittance of inability to grasp the concept of nothingness as the point of beginning for existentialism, and (2) the existential context of modern dance, appearing in its emphasis on the individual as well as the principle of creativity.³⁵

First, the idea of “nothingness” is an impossible thing to understand, especially from a privileged perspective. For centuries, the black body and mind have been stripped of their human existence, their experience deemed invisible. From a historical perspective, the ancestors of black Americans were forced into a world of physical and psychological unknown; placed into a metaphysical nothingness. In *African American Concert Dance (2001)*, dance historian John Perpener III discusses the “paradox of *being* and *not being*” of black Americans as well as the need of their ancestors to cultivate a new cultural identity from the oppressive parameters placed on their lives.³⁶ From this lens, black expressive culture itself is the product of existential thought. Freedom for the black body is not only seeking a physical release but also a mental catharsis from societal inequities.

³⁵Fraleigh, S. H. “Introduction,” in *Dance and the Lived Body*. Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996.

³⁶John O. Perpener, *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*. Urbana, Illinois. University of Illinois Press, 2001).

Second, Fraleigh's statement about the principle of creativity and emphasis on individualism within modern dance seems to misrepresent its stature. I argue that modern dance is not the pinnacle of existentialism. It lives within the framework of Europeanized societal acceptability, white sentiments that were established by ballet. All participants of society deal with varying degrees of privilege, but a white female dancing body in American society holds a privileged position over others. The white bodies that pioneered modern dance were affirmed in their beinghood. Even with bodies societally unequal to that of a man, they were acknowledged by the legislature and their white counterparts as human. I agree that some modern pioneers utilized the existential point of view to expand their creativity, but the genre was not born out of necessity to question existence, nor does it allow for limitless creativity. Modern dance was a response to the structure of ballet, with the freedom of improvisation later placed on top of the genre as a choreographic tool.

The "nothingness," that Fraleigh refers to, also negates the stimuli a body collects through lived experience. I would claim instead that styles like vernacular jazz and hip-hop are forms without creative bounds. This does not mean these styles are without technique or rules. All dance and body movements hold technique, but the improvisation element at the foundation of these styles encourages the individual to be unique in their expression without Eurocentric bounds around permissibility.³⁷ Modern dance has taken over the concert dance world in all of its (traditional and) contemporary forms. This dance genre partially originated from women's need to release themselves from the authoritarian and patriarchal grasp of ballet. Companies worldwide produce modern dance productions that reflect a Western sentiment with influence

³⁷Marcel Mauss. *Techniques of the Body* (1934). *Economy and Society* 2, no. 1 (February 1, 1973): 70–88

from their own cultural knowledge. The existentialism in modern dance upholds a perspective that lessens the humanity of black people.

Regardless of the complexities of modern dance, black people have made major contributions to modern dance canon. Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, which stands as a leading modern dance company worldwide, was founded in 1958 by a black man to uplift people from all walks of life in a time when concert dance offered limited roles to black and brown bodies. The Ailey company's primary genre is modern dance, specifically trained in the Horton technique created by Lester Horton. This technique was created by a white man based on a wide range of movement influences including Native American dances. From this technique Alvin Ailey was able to successfully choreograph works that reframed the image of the black body in motion. The use of Horton technique does not disqualify the Ailey company from their contribution to *black* in America or Black dance. Movement technique does not have to be tied to African American vernacular dance or of African diasporic origins to be considered Black dance. Nor is Black dance only represented by the presence of exclusively black bodies on stage. Ailey's practice of successfully using non-black bodies, while simultaneously extrapolating the inner workings of Black culture, is reproduced in *Freedom's Cadence*. The culture should be present in the movement as a reflection of the embodied experience of the black choreographer. (Remember, teach the culture first, and the movement will always follow.) What holds strong are the rhythmic choices which transfigure the movement into the Black experience. Black existentialism is not about throwing away "white tools" but rather a redressing and understanding how the racialization of the black body affects the psychological in a white society. This company stands as an example of Black existentialism leveraged to present Blackness inside of traditionally white spaces and informed my thesis movement research.

Ailey was a master at painting familiar stories of black life on stage. Fervent songs like the negro spiritual “Wade in the Water” would become part of the inspiration for their renowned masterpiece *Revelations*, which premiered in 1960, choreographed by Ailey. For context, this work was born during the United States Civil Rights era, adding to the necessity for representation of black bodies that shifted the narrative in the United States. This was an era of *movement* (figurative and literal) made to agitate a rigid system. When talking about this work, Ailey reflects on his life as a young kid in Texas and his experience in the southern Baptist Church. There are memories of “faith, hope, joy, and sometimes sadness.”³⁸ He was also inspired by the words of writers James Baldwin and Langston Hughes. The soundscape brings together black musical traditions in a way that speaks to the spirituality of each time period. What the sound's rhythm provides for the movement and the audience is also a reminder of perseverance:

“This suite explores...emotions of African American religious music which, like its heir, the Blues, takes many forms – ‘true spirituals’ with their sustained melodies, ring shouts, song-sermons, gospel songs, and holy blues – [all] songs of trouble, love and deliverance.”³⁹ - Alvin Ailey (1960)

With its movement and soundscape reflecting the heart of black culture, *Revelations* evokes deep emotion even after being performed every year for over six decades. In many ways, *Freedom's Cadence* works from the blueprint of Ailey's pivotal work. In sound and structure, and a loose narrative about the experience of being human. Witnessing this work has revealed possibilities for other dancers like me. The bodies reflect how I want to see myself: graceful, strong, sure of self, joyful. The Ailey company performs to packed crowds of various races and backgrounds, transcending religious and racial barriers, for each production of *Revelations* in

³⁸Ailey Pressroom. “Revelations Info Sheet.” Ailey Pressroom, pressroom.alvinailey.org/alvin-ailey-american-dance-theater/repertory/revelations. Accessed 1 Apr. 2026.

³⁹Revelations Info Sheet. From the premiere of *Revelations* on January 31, 1960, at the Kaufmann Concert Hall, 92nd Street YM-YWHA.

venues where the productions of classical ballets cannot fill the theater. Black dance on a concert stage (all genres included: ballet, modern, jazz, hip hop, etc.) does not lose its Blackness in the wake of the European context of the proscenium stage. It thrives in its expressive nature because it is born out of alternative thinking. This is evident by its continued appeal to black audiences even during a time when black bodies are more represented in white “high art” spaces.

In some ways, the Ailey company is propped up as evidence of black excellence in society due to its proximity to whiteness. This idea of *excellence* can be damaging to black creatives and black spaces. Even with companies like Ailey’s throughout the United States, which are working to purposefully transform the way the black body is presented and preserve Black traditions to tell Black stories, concert dance still does not fully value Blackness. Today, artists, companies, and organizations fight for funding to present their work. A ballet company’s position may be solidified in a major theater’s season selection, while other diasporic dance companies have to prove their value to be on the bill.

Some black dance companies have a culture centered around the thinness of their dancers’ bodies, still trying to appease a European physical aesthetic. I have been told by a major figure in the Black dance community that I am a “great dancer” and if I lost 50 pounds, they could “put me on the stage.” Progress is not linear; this outdated thought process still rears its head in other forms. This can be likened to more people knowing about anthropologist Katherine Dunham over her field colleague Pearl Primus. These views show why it is critical to produce work that specifically addresses the narrative of the black body. Antiblackness is embedded in society to the extent that it can infect our most sacred of spaces. Narratives that neglect the value of our experiences. For black people, the reclamation of the body means the reclaiming of existence. *A*

proclamation of emancipation. Freedom's Cadence affirms this reclamation by rhythmically knitting together Black experiences of joy and spiritual ecstasy.

LESSONS ON LOOPS: Negro spirituals, blues, and House music

Alongside dance, music is an undeniable source of connection within African diasporic communities, as well as a pillar of my thesis research and performance. Specifically in Black American culture, vernacular dance forms evolve with the music of the times. Starting from an orthodox understanding of rhythm, Black music traditions became the foundation of the work. Taking a peek into the structure of Black music to reveal what it may say about the culture. This chapter will highlight the embodied spirituality of the Black American culture through the analysis of musical traditions in Negro spirituals, blues, and House music.

The Black God

According to the Library of Congress, African American spirituals, also known as Negro spirituals, “constitute one of the largest and most significant forms of American folksong.” ([LOC.gov](https://www.loc.gov/rr/music/afamsp/spirituals.html)) These are religious folk songs created by enslaved Africans, adapted from European hymns and used as a representation of hope. Lyrics of spirituals referenced the turmoil of life on earth as temporary compared to the relief that awaited in heaven. These were songs of solace. First, passed down through oral traditions through call and response, then versions of the spirituals were transcribed in the 19th century. As an oral tradition, these spirituals were repeatedly sung to solidify themselves in the memory of generations.

Even though the enslaved created these religious songs, North Atlantic Christianity was the religion of the white slave masters imposed upon them. Enslaved people used the Christian God as the subject of these songs because those were the things they were allowed to be vocal about. Under the guise of “saving souls,” European colonizers enslaved Africans. The North Atlantic Christian religion has been used as propaganda and support for anti-black rhetoric since before the first enslaved peoples arrived in America. In 1616, Italian philosopher Lucilio Vanini

wrote that Africans were born of a “different Adam,” with a completely separate creation story than white Europeans.⁴⁰ This rhetoric insinuated Africans were of a separate species; they were not human. Christianity was used to keep enslaved peoples compliant. It was in the service of white supremacy. Enslaved people learned that a force larger than themselves decided they were sinners who needed to be saved, innately inferior to white people. Moreover, if they listened to their devout masters and overcame the impurity of their black skin, they would be rewarded in heaven. It is explicit that only divine intervention can relieve them of their suffering. So, they called on the God of North Atlantic Christianity.

In “Self-Transformation in American Blacks,” Roy D. Morrison II analyzes the role of North Atlantic Christianity in the lives of African Americans as a tool for self-transformation. Even after emancipation, Black Americans held on to Christianity, most becoming a part of the Baptist church. Morrison says the religion “provided a sense of self-worth and a sense of access to transcendent reality.”⁴¹ But how does one worship the same God of those who are their oppressors? Morrison presents the concept of the “white God” versus the “black God.” There is a running joke around “black Jesus” in the Black community: Catholic churches have a white Jesus pictured on the cross, while Baptist churches have images of a black Jesus shown around the church. Depending on the church, Jesus might even sport a small afro rather than the long, straight flowing hair depicted in most images. Morrison brings this into theological analysis. “The notion that the God of North Atlantic Theology is a white God, who, therefore, is innately incapable of experiencing concern for the plight of black people.”⁴² The white God is an “inactive, silent God with terror, heartlessness...evil” and skin that does not reflect his people.

⁴⁰STAMPED Reynolds and Kendi, p.22

⁴¹Morrison II, 1997, p.39

⁴²Morrison II, 1997, p.42

The black God reflects not only what Black people see in themselves, but also what they desire from the earthly world. They are Gods, kings, queens, and sovereigns. For instance, in Countee Cullen's poem "Yet Do I Marvel," the black Christ's crucifixion is identified with a Black male lynch victim.⁴³ The point of view of God shifted based on the needs of the black community.

God, from the Black Baptist point of view, is most importantly *present*, with the congregation having a direct line to him through the "holy spirit." An adage in the Baptist community is "Call Him on the main line, and tell Him what you want."⁴⁴ There is no boundary between the black God and his people. In Catholicism, for example, a predominantly white denomination of Christianity, from the congregation can only reach God and be forgiven through a priest; there is a clear hierarchy of who is worthy to speak with God.⁴⁵ For Baptists, even as a sinner, you have the ability to call on God to personally ask for forgiveness. In response, the holy spirit shows itself through "shouting", a possession in which the person displays a rhythmic embodiment of the holy spirit. This exposes a connection to African ancestry with their deliberate departure from the principles of the white God and quiet worship principles; the body becomes the prayer.⁴⁶ The expression of the *soul of Black folk* in church is related to movement.⁴⁷

Signal Songs and Embodied Spirituality

Spirituals were sung for religious observance but also served as encoded songs to allow secret communication among enslaved peoples while under the watch of their oppressors. These

⁴³Morrison II, 1997 p.44

⁴⁴First field recording of traditional hymn by John Lomax in 1937. Famous variation known by Mavis Staples connection to the sonic power of Black female voices in gospel originating from blues sensibilities.

⁴⁵Lipka, M. "The Most and Least Racially Diverse U.S. Religious Groups." Pew Research Center, 27 July 2015. www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/.

⁴⁶Perron, 2001 p.28

⁴⁷Reference to Du Bois' book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)

were called signal songs. Black people, again, are using creativity to move around the bounds of oppression. The belting and vocalizations ringing through the air kept the enslaved encouraged to push through the anguish and exhaustion of forced labor during the day; at night, the words were signals of safety. It is documented that lyrics to songs like “Wade in the Water” were made literal in the Underground Railroad; to “wade in the water” meant to stay in the water while crossing into the North, as it was not safe to reveal themselves from hiding.⁴⁸ Enslaved peoples reimagined these spirituals to reshape their reality.

In my thesis, I use the signal song “Couldn’t Hear Nobody Pray,” to comment on this reshaping of reality. The lyrics denote a heavy-hearted individual who feels as if their prayers have not been answered; more crucially, they yearn for someone to pray with them. The speaker seeks to reinforce their prayers through the power of unity. Signifying danger, this spiritual was sung when there was no clear path for the enslaved to escape. When their plans had been foiled. The variation used in *Freedom’s Cadence* was created in collaboration with musicians Alvin Mayes and Isiah Johnson. I was looking for an opportunity to experiment with remixing. We worked together, along with sound designer Kiefer Cure, to create layers presenting this negro spiritual in a way that represented my rhythmic sensibilities. The variation also highlights Negro spirituals’ connection to other Black musical traditions, such as jazz and gospel, as they often live separately from church services in their contemporary contexts. The religious connections of spirituals to North Atlantic Christianity do not prevent nonbelievers from acknowledging the reverence of their sound. Negro spirituals have continued as a symbol of unification in the Black American community, in both religious and secular settings.

⁴⁸Wright, J. (2006). *Songs of Remembrance*. The Journal of African American History, 91(4), 413–424.

Part of the appeal of spirituals to both religious and secular settings is its tonality, cueing the listener into its connections to a time before. The bold vocals come in strong and unabashed in their break into the sonic space. As the foundation of a section in my thesis work, *Freedom's Cadence*, I looked to grasp the essence of a spiritual through movement. I generated movement based not only on the lyrics but also on choreographing to the cadence of the song. The movement specifically travels horizontally across the stage, gradually moving from stage right to stage left. This is a small reference to the mural, "Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery to Reconstruction," by Aaron Douglas.⁴⁹ This artist is known for his layering of angular, 2-dimensional figures over vast landscapes. Looking from left to right, there is a story being told, with a central figure illuminating the way. Dancers briefly pause, facing the massive curtains that show an angelic warping figure of light. This improvisational moment stands on repetition and duration as points of experimentation, with one dancer as the metronome. Here, the "light" is the building of the individual within the safety of the community. It ends with each dancer desperately reaching out to various points, reaching beyond the theater. Then they softly yield to the reality of gravity. This choreography of yielding reflects the lyrics in performance.

Zora Neale Hurston analyzes the composition and performance of spirituals in a collection of essays, published as *The Sanctified Church*.⁵⁰ She also shares detailed accounts of shouting from her observations of Southern Christian churches. Hurston begins by stating that spirituals are "unceasing variations around a theme."⁵¹ Though most of the lyrics may remain the same, based on the community, the church, and/or the singer, the spiritual has a new life. As folklore, it spreads through oral tradition. Spirituals change slightly based on who you hear them

⁴⁹Douglas, A. (1934). "Aspects of Negro Life: From Slavery Through Reconstruction" [Oil on canvas].

⁵⁰Hurston, Z. N. *The Sanctified Church*[Collection of Essays]. Marlowe & Company, 1981. Alexander Street.

⁵¹Hurston, 1929

from. Hurston rejects performative neo-spirituals as genuine representations of the ancestral songs. In her estimation, singers with classical training and a Europeanized understanding of notes and timing shift the potency of the compositions:

“The jagged harmony is what makes it, and it ceases to be what it was when this is absent [...] the real Negro singer cares nothing about pitch. The first notes just burst out [...] Hence the harmony and disharmony, the shifting keys and broken time that make up the spiritual.” – Zora Neale Hurston (1929)

She continues further down the page, with this idea of disharmony and dissonance that is present within the performance. This is why I lean into acapella. Instrumentation in the background sometimes feels like it tampers with the guttural feeling of the vocal performance. It changes the cadence of the vocal artist. Similarly, my choices for silence during sections in my thesis presentation allowed me to visually “hear” the cadence of the dancers’ movements.

In James Weldon Johnson’s account of spirituals, there is always movement in their performance, which reflects the singer’s understanding of the emotions behind the lyrics. Johnson refers to the syncopated sound of spirituals and secular music as akin to one another, with the differentiation in physical response reflective of differing sets of emotions and settings.⁵² There is familiarity in the swing and “stop time”, giving space to the expression of emotion. A completely still or silent audience is the antithesis of any Black performer. Hand clapping, stomping, whooping, hootin’, and hollerin’ are all signifiers of the audience’s collective resonance with the song. He calls this religious ecstasy, a physical representation of the joy of being alive. Rhythmic play in sound and movement converges to establish existence.

Dissonance and harmony can be witnessed throughout a Black church service. Sometimes the congregation joins in on the song or responds to the talents of the singer with

⁵²Johnson, J. W., & Johnson, J. R. (1925). *The Books of American Negro Spirituals*. In *Signifyin(g), Santifyin’ and Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture* (pp. 45–71). University of Massachusetts Press

their own vocalizations. Hurston's observations account for rhythmic breaks throughout prayers where the congregation interrupts the speaker with shouts of encouragement. Similarly, in the sermon, the preacher adds accented syllables that change the flow of each sentence. The entire service is rhythmically dense and improvisational. Hurston is not referencing only instrumentation but has a keen sense of the abrupt spaces created in the flow of the service, pushing against "harmony." At the height of the service is when shouting is usually present, but it can begin whenever there is an emotional overwhelm to usher in the "holy spirit."

The praise break and shouting are major but tangential sections of worship services. It arises at the overlap of music, vocalizations of the congregation, and energetic pleadings of the preacher. Anita Gonzalez, scholar of black performance studies, states, "Often the vibration of the voices become kinesthetic responses that result in physical leaps, shivers, or arm raising." The flow of the service pauses, and space is held for the moment. It rides out until the vibrational energy subsides; there is no forcing its conclusion. The "holy spirit" might build up again after a short veil of stillness. After this "break", the service continues as if the praise break didn't happen. Directly after the spiritual section, I used Hurston's ethnographic notes to build the "Testimony" solo. Destiny Bugg, the soloist for this section, and I worked together using our experiential and embodied knowledge to add new choreographic layers to Hurston's clerical accounts of shouting in the observed church service, including time stamps for each moment. Within the solo were moments of improvisation where the dancer was inside a personal spiritual moment on stage. My goal was to portray the testimony as a moment of pleading to the community. A moment of allowing the community to witness a new version of self. There are images of joy, gratitude, support, and vulnerability. We recreated the rhythmic Black church scene of spiritual ecstasy extracted from its religious contexts.

The Jook and Blues

While Hurston acknowledges the significance of these experiences in the Black church, she does not qualify the religion as the reason for its significance. Rather, she uses the scenes of the church to paint a holistic view of Black culture with its rhythmic traditions. Hurston heralds “the Jook” as the most important place in America for music, with blues and jazz as the expressions born from these other sacred spaces.⁵³ Again, referencing her essay, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Hurston first depicts the scene of the Jook in terms of its sound. Hurston articulates the layering of musical instruments, with each instrument responsible for a new rhythm. The use of the voice for call and response from the singer to the audience, and between audience members, is emphasized in Hurston’s account of these songs. “The idea in the Jook is to gain sensation [...]”⁵⁴ As the origins of blues and jazz, “Jooking” songs were played in these “shoddy confines” and spread by word of mouth for years before being popularized. There was an ability for dark-skinned, shapely women who were usually chastised in everyday society to gain respect if they could “jook.”

While jook joints provided the space for black bodies to find physical release, it was blues music that aided its patrons in reckoning with the realities of their lives. As Hurston accounts, the blues uses “call and response” as a compositional tool between the vocalists, the audience, and the instruments. Blues music outwardly acknowledges the anguish in life while reflecting the sentiments of the community. The lyrics of blues mold these hardships into celebrated pleasantries. Broken relationships, financial destitution, social tribulations, etc., are given new definitions. There is a dissonance between what the artists sing and what they mean.

⁵³Hurston, Z. N. (1999). Characteristics of Negro Expression. In *Signifying, Sanctifyin’ and Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*. University of Massachusetts Press.

⁵⁴Hurston, (1934)

Even the naming of the “blues” is contradictory to the deep, energetic bellowing and sometimes upbeat music it represents.

Like their predecessor, spirituals, the lyrics of blues songs are encoded with language made specifically for their audience. It uses vernacular language to create idioms only clear to those who are in “the know.” As Hurston describes spirituals, Angela Davis, in her book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, relates the blues to folklore. It manifests in oral traditions traveling from one place to the next: “A blues sung by one person and heard, remembered, revised, and resung by another belonged as much to the second performer as the first.”⁵⁵ Both authors call attention to the underlying collective experience and performance in these forms of musical expression. They evolve with the community, not held with one individual.

Blue's sensibilities differ from the Christian musical practices in the explicit elevation of the body rather than an emphasis on the soul. As mentioned, Black churches created a derivative in North Atlantic Christianity by incorporating “shouting.” But the tradition of shouting does not overshadow the long-established Christian views of the body as evil due to its connection to sexuality and sin or “flesh.” This is especially true for the movement of black bodies.⁵⁶ Unlike the presence of modern-day liturgical dance ministries, movement in the church was once limited to swaying and shouting. Only those embodiments that reflected spiritual transformation were acceptable. Restrictions were even placed on musical instruments that were allowed to be played in church. There are many examples of gospel singers who were chastised by the church for their secular blues singing, partying on Saturday night, and showing up to church on Sunday

⁵⁵Davis, A. Y. (1999). “Preaching the Blues.” In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (pp. 120–137). Vintage Books.

⁵⁶Thompson, K. D. (2012). “Some were wild, some were soft, some were tame, and some were fiery”: Female Dancers, Male Explorers, and the Sexualization of Blackness, 1600-1900. *Black Women, Gender + Families*, 6(2), p. 6-9

morning.⁵⁷ More importantly, some artists blurred the line between the blues and gospel, such as Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Sounds from the electric guitar infused her songs with the deep, wailing of “bent” notes found in blues music, with the spiritual longing of gospel music.⁵⁸

Blues music was connected to gospel before these musical fusions began. They are born of the same culture and communities. It is essential to remember that the church congregation and the patrons of the Jook joint were often the same. Both genres are drawn from spirituals and work songs while employing call-and-response practices. Like the church service that Hurston rhythmically describes, the composition of blues music leaves space for the artist’s testimony atop simple riffs. There are adlibs, jokes, additional narrative details, and instrumental interludes that all seem to slip into the sonic space unexpectedly. They provide a “break”, a dissonance, a dysfluency in the flow of the expression. The introduction of these elements does not rush or push the rest of the composition but rather invites the listener to sink deeper into the loop of the song.

Finding Loops of Retreat

This brings me to the introduction of music theorist and composer, Jjjjjerome Ellis.⁵⁹ Ellis is a multidisciplinary artist who centers their stutter as a point of societal refusal and rhythm in their work. Their thesis, called “The Clearing,” illuminates a “holdtime” and “non-lineal time continuum” which exists within the dysfluency of Black music. Ellis states, “Blackness, dysfluencies and musics open the possibility of refusal: refusal to consent to be a single being, refusal to speak fluently, refusal to move immediately to the next syllable, an ontological

⁵⁷Host, Stephen Henderson, Interviewee, Rev. Robert Jones, Sr. (2022, June 28). The sacred and the secular: How gospel music grew from the Blues. PBS American Black Journal.

⁵⁸Bent notes are a musical technique that intentionally alters a note's pitch to create emotion.

⁵⁹Jerome is spelled here with five j’s because this is Ellis’ artist to name, which showcases his embracing of being a person with a stutter.

withdrawal [...]”⁶⁰ It is the offering of possibilities. Within this clearing is where transformations occur. Not only does it change the listener's relationship to the sonic vibrations, but it also creates space in time for the listener to step outside of their present. There is an emphasis placed on how these dysfluencies create what Ellis calls loops of retreat. “In a trance, we cross over. We escape.”⁶¹ *Keep going*. Synthesizing the writing of Ellis and Hurston, I can recognize the mutual existence of these sacred spaces. In *Freedom's Cadence*, I blur the lines between the secular and sacred. I offer an opportunity to see the overlapping pulses between the two worlds. From the deep conjuration of the spiritual and testimony, we transition to a club rhythm but maintaining the ecstatic pleading. Though the jook joint and the church symbolized opposing views of life, they held the same function for black bodies. The bodies in these spaces were not only moving rhythmically, hearts beating on one accord, but they were also transcended into a sonic holdtime free of their circumstances. Breaking through the boundaries to discover alternative realities within their black bodies. Black lives are revitalized by stopping to feel and relive harsh realities with reimagined endings.

Identifying the elements needed to create this rhythmic holdtime is framed within my thesis performance work, *Freedom's Cadence*. Repetition stands out as a foundational element that fosters this holdtime. James A. Snead, scholar of American media, postulates the implications of repetition in Black culture in his 1981 journal article, *On Repetition in Black Culture*.⁶² He uses the term “cut” to communicate the interruption and restart of a loop. This pattern is explicitly written in the essay as ABA, ABCBA, or ABC(B)A.⁶³ Snead says, “Black

⁶⁰Ellis, Jerome. *The Clearing: Music, dysfluency, Blackness, and time*. Journal of Interdisciplinary Voice Studies, 5, no. 2, 2020, pp. 215–233

⁶¹Ellis, p. 222

⁶²Snead, J. A. (2017). *On Repetition in Black Culture*. African American Review, 50(4), 648–656.

⁶³Snead, p.653. The parentheses around “B” represent a shift in energy of the original phrase based on a response to the first “cut.”

music sets up expectations and disturbs them at irregular intervals.”⁶⁴ This tactic seems to have cultural incentives; it entreats the listener to think larger than themselves as an individual:

“Because one rhythm always defines another in black music, and beat is an entity of relation, any ‘self-consciousness’ or ‘achievement’ in the sense of an individual participant’s working towards his or her own rhythmic or tonal climax ‘above the mass’ would have disastrous results.” - Snead (1981)

Snead discusses the existence of “cutting” beyond music. He salutes Black churches as a cornerstone of repetition in Black culture for music, dance, and language, specifically mentioning “call and response” as standing on the assurance of repetition.⁶⁵ Among music artists like James Brown, Snead mentions literary artists, like Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, and Ishmael Reed, who utilize “cutting” as a device to further their storytelling. He situates loops and their subsequent rhythm as foundational to Black creative practices. It creates a metaphysical holdtime to reflect on meaning.

This holdtime is not just metaphysical, palpable in the air, but it can also be spatial. In the duet in *Freedom’s Cadence*, I experimented with oscillating between phrases. It is important to note that these phrases were built completely separately from one another. We started with the two dancers improvising, with shifting of the phrases cued by the rhythms of a complex jazz composition. Though interesting to see, it was too challenging to be sustainable, especially considering this was a small section of their full duet. It then developed into a numerical system in which the movements have certain numbers. The dancers were asked to switch to a new phrase based on this numerical system. It felt like a more complex option than just moving based on the rhythm but turned out to be the correct structure for illuminating the intertwining lives of these moving bodies. The dancers had an individual, shifting sequence they learned. Based on

⁶⁴Snead, p.654

⁶⁵Snead, p.653

their natural overlaps, I tailored intentional repetitions and reverberations in time. Slapping of the thighs became a sonic call to each other while also calling forward, traveling in time to the spiritual section that had not yet been seen. It is accidentally conversational from the perspective of the audience, but the dancers are keenly listening to each other. Sensing. Then it transforms into a conversation that the audience can hear.

I play with rhythmic call and response between the dancers. They are now in charge of the sonic space. Before this was choreographed, it was a small improvisation between the two dancers. We played with listening, repeating what the other person said, and then adding to the sentence. We talked a lot about what it means to respond and what makes a good conversation. Listening and connection in this movement then became a proxy for breathing. I tried to get the dancers to take liberties with pausing. I asked them to hear/feel what I saw. But what revolutionized this entire duet was asking them to go through the section together and identify the moments they wanted to breathe, pause, look at each other, take in the moment, etc. From that day, the duet excelled into something that was purely about them enjoying being in the space together. It was no longer a dance inside a work. They were focused solely on each other within their repetitions.

House Music and Culture

As Snead uncovers, Black music traditions utilize repetition as a tool for transformation. Repetition establishes the rhythm, but it is not monotonous in *color*. The repetition deepens appreciation of the rhythm, the movement, and *being* by proposing another opportunity to press with or refuse the beat. Within these epic loops, there is infinite space to explore new variations of living. It recreates the non-linear nature of time. House music, utilized in my thesis presentation, is characterized by its continuous bass rhythm in 4/4 time and is often layered with

other rhythms as a “melody” to the song. A vocalist can be heard floating on top of the beat, divorced from the strictness of the repetitive bass. Like the spirituals and blues that preceded it, House music uses wailing, bending notes. Traced back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was created in the Southside and West Loop of Chicago, Illinois. As the daughter of disco, Chicago House music was born in the small, tightly packed corners of these black and brown communities.⁶⁶

It is important to acknowledge the Black and queer origins of this Chicago-born sound. Micah Salkind excavates the stories of these queer undergrounds that led to house music culture, knitting together the contextual histories of its pioneers and champions. These communities were not only physically living on the fringes of the city but were also socially isolated as black bodies and further ostracized in their sexuality. Sexuality is often a taboo in the Black community due to its close ties to Christianity. In the margins of the marginalized community, in dark confined spaces, came the genesis of a sound that blends Afro-Sonic traditions and creates dissonances between the expected and the improvisatory.⁶⁷

The intersectionality of marginalization holds the ability to deeply engage with societal discourse, thwarting traditional understandings. Audre Lorde, black feminist poet, said, “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.” Aisha Finch uses this quote in her articulation of the role of those who hold intersectionalities within society as the pioneers of “radical care.”⁶⁸ It is a philosophy of survival in the face of death. The threat of death for the black body is both literal and social. Black Feminist and queer practices in the Black community have brought forward a holistic understanding of society. In

⁶⁶Salkind, M. E. (2019). *Do You Remember House?: Chicago's Queer of Color Undergrounds*. Oxford University Press.

⁶⁷Salkind, 50

⁶⁸Finch, A.K. (2022). *Introduction: Black Feminism and the Practice of Care*. *Palimpsest: A Journal on Women, Gender, and the Black International* 11(1), 1-41.

moments where the world around the community feels levied against it, the community must examine the health of each individual to build the strength of the whole. *Ubuntu*. Care for one another is a decolonized practice of love. It is not a Western heteronormative practice. Finch declares the need for slave regimes in the Americas as causing theft of “Black sentence, corporeal wholeness, and élan vital.”⁶⁹ This essay reiterates how this practice of radical care, for self and others, is intentional and must be employed constantly for survival, especially in the Black community. It is a constant refusal to die, figuratively and literally. Silence meant death. Earlier, I referenced the House dancers that go “missing in action,” and the dancers need to recreate themselves away from the world that lurked outside of the club. I see House music and its movement fall into this loop of radical care. Their weekly practice of dancing inside the clubs with each other, witnessing one another, was a practice of self-care.

Salkind describes this self-care experience of House music in a way that I have been unable to articulate, as an:

“[...] interplay between extrinsic and intrinsic vibratory processes, indeed the convergence or divergence between a dancer’s internal pulse and external vibrotactile pressure, might incite pleasure, pain, or catharsis.” (Salkind, 61: referencing the research of Luis-Manuel Garcia)

Salkind seconds the theories of Snead and Finch. The emphasis placed on recognition of polyrhythms of self and attentiveness to the rhythm of the world around their bodies reinvokes the spirit of Ubuntu. It highlights self-reflection and processing that exist in many deep care practices, such as meditation. With this House sound, I feel the most spiritually awakened. The trance-like rhythm *takes me to church*. It builds spiritual ecstasy. An unparalleled feeling of joy; a mystical self-transcendence.⁷⁰ I imagine this is the “colored me” Zora Neale Hurston felt. My

⁶⁹ Finch, p. 10

⁷⁰ From the Oxford Languages dictionary definition of ecstasy.

pulse throbbing like a war drum, *I feel Black*. An experience only to be found inside the socio-sonic loops of Black music traditions, which all came together at The Warehouse.

At The Warehouse, the birthplace of House music, gospel and spirituals could be heard layered atop popular secular songs. Worlds collided inside this new sound. Within the walls of this sacred space, the community was “physically and psychically” released from the rules of the outside world and found joy with each other.⁷¹ Salkind refers to the spiritual experience of these Warehouse patrons as worship under the direction of pioneering DJs, likening their roles to that of preachers, with accented call and response. Like the preacher, the DJ calls out to the congregation through sonic vibration and adjusts the next “call” based on the congregation’s response. Like an old school Black church, if the preacher is *preachin’* and the flock gets to *shoutin’*, there is no foreseeable end to the service. The same loop can be found in the performance of blues singers and musicians, always looking to the audience for help to complete their storytelling. As an improvisational structure, the performance and story shift as does the audience and their reactions.

Black Southern Baptist churches, Jook Joints, and House clubs are all rhythmically dense and improvisational sacred spaces. These sacred spaces hold black performance, spaces of witnessing. They encourage embodied spirituality, signaled by rhythmic undertones found in the music. Rhythmic feedback loops are nested inside these Black cultural practices. I use these loops as the connective tissue throughout my thesis presentation. The House sound of the last section features samples from two Baptist sermons. Completing the loop between spirituals and house music. The sermons plead for the congregation to make sure they show up, because they might just find what they need. That sometimes, in the midst of the struggle, they will find joy.

⁷¹Salkind, p.51

In House culture, they call it “getting your life.” Anthropologist Jafari Allen explains this as stepping outside of current pretensions of life to reimagine other ways of living, but above all, sharing the vision with others.⁷² Revealing the possibilities that exist inside of these loops with new bodies and redressed fragmentation. They become Gods, kings, queens, and sovereigns. These sonic loops bring about spiritual awakenings for their listeners. Dichotomies of life are fashioned into fragmented rhythms, disguised as entertainment or escapism, but utilized as a conduit of hope. Rhythmic representations of these loops are reborn on stage inside of Black performance to display the black experience.

⁷²Salkind, p.63

RHYTHMIC SENSIBILITIES IN PERFORMANCE: Blackness on Stage

Black performance on stage is a demonstration of Black expression. Zora Neale Hurston is a figure I look to often as an authority on Black expression. Her ethnographic methods and anthropological studies of Black Southern communities produced more than three decades of literary material. As an anthropologist, she studied American folklore, specifically, the cultural customs, beliefs, and practices of black people.⁷³ This includes dialect, dances, songs, and stories as they relate to their everyday life. Hurston was more than an accomplished author; she was well-versed in Black theater, music, and dance. Historian Anthea Kraut repositions Hurston as a leading luminary of diasporic movement on the concert stage.⁷⁴ Kraut details four different productions Hurston choreographed and directed based on her research of the Bahamas and South Florida. The first production premiered in 1932, and later versions toured until 1934.⁷⁵ Hurston tied these folk dances of the islands to the lives of those in South Florida. This was unique in its inclusion of Caribbean culture in an American production. Moreover, it introduced the concept of the African Diaspora that focused on vernacular, a true reflection of black people internationally. Rather than being presented as completely separate, they were framed within the same narrative.

In this framing and in her synthesis of embodied theories in the African diaspora, Hurston was ahead of her time. In her essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Hurston considers twelve prominent components present in Black expression: drama, will to adorn, angularity, asymmetry, dancing, Negro folklore, culture heroes, originality, imitation, absence of the

⁷³“Research Guides: Library Research Guide for Folklore and Mythology.” Harvard Library, guides.library.harvard.edu/folk_and_myth. Accessed 1 Apr. 2026.

⁷⁴Kraut, A. (2008). *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston* (1st ed.). University of Minnesota Press.

⁷⁵Kraut, 2008

concept of privacy, the Jook, and dialect.⁷⁶ This essay stands as a pivotal text in its acknowledgement of black people as creators of art with original processes. Beyond black as a people, but instead Black as a culture. Black *is* the defining culture of America. This type of analysis would be coined as Black performance theory decades later. Black performance theory and the Black Arts Movement intersected at their emergence in the late 20th century, analyzing visual art, literary art, dance, and theater.

Black Performance Theory

Hurston's iconic essay, *Characteristics of Negro Expression*, originally published in 1934, is featured in *Black Performance Theory*, which was published in 2014. This is an anthology of essays dedicated to presenting theories of how blackness is presented through and in performance, edited by Thomas DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez. As scholars of intercultural dance and African American studies, DeFrantz and Gonzalez co-write their introduction to the book and inaugurated the term "black sensibilities." This term refers to "the enlivened, vibrating components of a palpable black familiar —demonstrate the microeconomics of gesture that cohere in black performance[...]."⁷⁷ What makes this concept refreshing is the emphasis placed on components and microeconomics of black expression. Rather than stressing the aesthetics, the idea of black sensibilities widens the net that is cast by black performance and expression. These *microeconomics* deal with the social and historical influences behind the decisions and choices. Black sensibilities are the "creative tactics employed consciously and subconsciously." It embodies knowledge passed down in Black culture, learned through being in relation to one another.

⁷⁶Zora Neale Hurston, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," in *Signifying, Santifyin' and Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

⁷⁷DeFrantz, T. F., & Gonzalez, A. (2014). "From 'Negro expression' to 'Black performance.'" In T. F. DeFrantz & A. Gonzalez (Eds.), *Black Performance Theory* (pp. 1–15). Duke University Press.

Though each genre of African American vernacular dance may look different from an outsider's perspective, they share movement vocabulary in addition to structure. Improvisation, musicality, and communal-based environments are integral parts of these dance genres. The choreography inside of my thesis presentation, *Freedom's Cadence*, relies on these genres' shared foundations and sensibilities as the impetus for dancers to shift between different styles of movement on the stage. Jacqui Malone is a historian of American dance who has done extensive research on Black American vernacular dance in performance with emphasis on vocal choreography, sorority and fraternity song and dance rituals, and the movement stylizations of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) marching bands. Like the movement in my thesis, these HBCU practices in black performance are an amalgamation of different cultural influences. HBCUs are treasured by the Black community as establishments of cultural knowledge. These colleges and universities' structures were put in place specifically to affirm Blackness and provide education to African Americans. *Steppin' on the Blues the Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* unveils the presence of traditional rhythmic play through a contemporary lens of African Diasporic movement. This book was published in 1996, during the height of HBCUs, but the traditions Malone analyzes are still major points of Black culture today.

“Stepping” is a vernacular practice that features synchronized and complex rhythmic body movements that originated as a part of sororities and fraternities on these campuses.⁷⁸ She connects this display of vigorous hand and foot movement to “patting,” which was done among enslaved peoples as a time-keeping method for music, because drumming was discouraged. When performing these movements, the practitioner represents their community; they operate as

⁷⁸Malone, Jacqui. *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996

one entity moving toward a singular purpose. *They must be so managed as neither to hasten or retard the beat.* Though this form is always fully choreographed, each rhythm is to be a surprise to the opposing group. Dissonance is created within the rhythmic loop of the step routine; the surprise is the “cut” Snead refers to. It is a physical display of layered *internal and external* rhythms that Salkind describes in House music culture. It is a friendly competition of who can display a greater sense of rhythmic understanding and coalescence. The reaction of spectators drives the performers to find synergetic rhythmic energy. “In the degree to which rhythm is sensuously embodied, it illuminates the spirit.”⁷⁹ According to Malone, Black American vernacular dance is characterized by propulsive rhythm. *Keep going.*

Polyrhythm is often identified as an Africanist aesthetic in African American vernacular dance, as reflected in the work of Malone. The use of drums in traditional West and Central African rituals has been described as representing the first rhythm of life, our heartbeat. *An internal rhythmic loop.* In some dialects, only one word represents dance and music. The desire to be rhythmically connected is present across the diaspora. Yvonne Daniel, a specialist in dance performance and Caribbean societies, makes connections of rhythmic significance across the African diaspora in danced, sung, and drummed rituals. Daniel states that inside African diasporic dance, “Meaning registers within visceral responses to kinesthetic and musical affect.”⁸⁰ Traditional rituals consist of specific body positions down to details of the hands, with the music signifying the timing of learned ritual practices. If the two are out of sync, the ritual no longer meets its codified purpose. It holds no meaning. More explicitly, Daniel discusses her

⁷⁹Malone, p.32

⁸⁰Daniel, Y. (2010). “Rhythmic Remembrances.” In M. Diouf & I. K. Nwankwo (Eds.), *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World*. University of Michigan Press.

theory of “buried mathematics,” pinpointing the fundamental rhythmic relationship between tones or intervals that “structure and ignite [the] spiritual transformations.”⁸¹

Black American and Caribbean ways of life and culture can be differentiated in many ways, but the concept of diaspora allows me to put these cultures in conversation. Overlaps are evident between the cultures and their aesthetics, to reveal *Blackness*, especially in the elevation of music and dance as invaluable parts of community building. Daniel reveals that the role of rhythm in African Diasporic dance is integral to the deciphering of its movement vocabulary and that there is meaning in rhythm. An untrained ear is unable to recognize these patterns. Practitioners must be sensitive to the movements of others and the rhythmic timing of the drum with themselves. The dancers must possess an *internal and external awareness*. Due to the heavy *repetition* of these rituals, the community can easily recognize those who do not possess their rhythmic understanding based on the movements they choose in reaction to the drums.

As Daniel describes the learning of rituals, tap dance first starts with the basics of the rhythmic technique, the codified steps. Then, as a tap dancer gains experience, they should be able to recognize the rhythmic timing of the music to insert improvised yet specific codified steps, acting as another layer of percussive instrument. Tap dance is truly American, born through the rhythmic expression of African enslaved peoples and transformed through the experience of freed Blacks. Tap dance has a distinct use of syncopation and rhythmic improvisation. Even in tap dancing a cappella, the rhythm of the dancer should render a complexity that accentuates tones in certain intervals to tell a story. When the community has witnessed this “ritual” on numerous occasions, they can tell the level of cultural knowledge based on the clarity of expression in the tones of the tap shoes. The same is true for the tradition

⁸¹Daniel, p.8

of stepping, described by Malone. Layered rhythms are shown through embodied wisdom and resonate sonically through the space.

This is where the Africanist aesthetic of polyrhythm comes into the conversation and my thesis research. Inside my thesis presentation, I embedded stepping and tap dance as rhythmic breaks, which are witnessed sonically by the audience. Performing complex rhythms and deciphering their complexities are learned cultural practices. Whether it is the sacred rituals of the Caribbean or the secular rituals of American HBCU sororities and fraternities, African diasporic rhythms connect audiences to their humanity and their spirituality. It is an encoded language that helps establish community, sometimes globally.

Examining the Diasporic Web in Black Concert Dance

The fragmentation of the black body exists worldwide. Transnationally, every country has unique historical circumstances that have persecuted darker bodies. Blackness is worldwide. Nadine George-Graves, whose work is situated in the intersectionality of African American studies, describes the connection across the African diaspora as diasporic spidering; it has multiple points of connection and is not fixed in time.⁸² This new envisioning of the diaspora becomes a continually evolving entity that is always incorporating new information and situated spatially in time and space with infinite beginnings. Visualized as a web, Black performance is never static; it has a constant life. Its ephemeral nature becomes tethered through the multiple experiences of blackness. For me, it welcomes agency for black people to continue to build their own movement practices while feeling comfort in relating to the movement that has existed before. It encourages a genuine exchange of expression inside the web.

⁸²George-Graves, N. (2014). "Diasporic Spidering: Constructing Contemporary Black Identities." In T. F. DeFrantz & A. Gonzalez (Eds.), *Black Performance Theory* (pp. 34–44). Duke University Press.

Some notable people in the web who influenced my thesis movement research are Dianne McIntyre, Dr. S. Ama Wray, Camille A. Brown, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar. In performance, these artists not only demonstrate this diasporic web of life in their movement philosophies and choreography but also hold a rhythmic prowess that defines their movement signature. These artists play with micro shifts in rhythmic understanding that result in large visual reframing of black dance. Each artist also stands on the shoulders of Hurston's work in their engagement with folk practices. In this chapter, I will expand on rhythm as a prominent sensibility in Black dance while detailing the approaches of these artists as instrumental figures in reflecting black culture on the concert stage.

Dianne McIntyre is one of the most accomplished female choreographers of the 20th century, with over 200 choreographed works, including work in feature films, theatre, and television productions.⁸³ McIntyre's work is recognized for its unique positionality to music/rhythm. She has been choreographing and performing for over fifty years, with her signature tied to the freedom of live music and poetic text; a dynamic tool to expand the audience's experience of the choreographic work. The rhythmic patterns of the music, in tandem with the cadence of the spoken word, heighten the bodily expression of the dancers.

Dance historian Veta Goler describes McIntyre's work as possessing the blues aesthetic. The term "*blues aesthetic*" refers to the influence of blues sensibilities on Black expressive culture; it exists beyond music and across American culture due to the contributions of black people to the arts. Goler defines this aesthetic as an approach that claims affirmation in the face of adversity for power in the African American community, but "in a way that is accessible to,

⁸³ About Dianne McIntyre. (n.d.). [Artist Website]. *Dianne McIntyre*.

and expressive of, a more universal audience.”⁸⁴ Relying on vernacular expression that lives within her dancers’ bodies, McIntyre uses improvisation as one frame for her work, along with her deep rhythmic understanding. I experimented with emulating McIntyre’s musical sensitivity in *Freedom’s Cadence* by identifying one line of rhythm inside a musical composition to emphasize in the choreography. I found a need to *give in* to the push and pull of the music. It was as if I was letting the music tell me where to go. From this exploration, I developed the solo and first introduction to loops.

In McIntyre’s work, the dancer’s body becomes a musical instrument so the audience can “see music moving and to hear the musicality of the dancer’s bodies.” She believes that movement and music have no difference.⁸⁵ Goler reveals something special in McIntyre’s choreographic process. While the musicians are in rehearsal, improvising to create the composition, McIntyre moves along with the sound as the other dancers mimic her movements. Like a blues musician, McIntyre seeks to utilize the body in unconventional ways to achieve the desired “sound.” This results in a transformative performance representative of the African American experience.

Like most famous blues musicians, McIntyre’s love for the rhythm and “the sound” started as a young child, with her parents often playing music on the radio. She recalls trying to move her body like what she heard.⁸⁶ Her musician collaborators refer to her as a “musician’s dancer” due to her musical knowledge and attention to the depths of meaning music can hold.⁸⁷

⁸⁴Goler, V. “Moves on Top of Blues : Dianne McIntyre’s Blues Aesthetic.” *Dancing Many Drums : Excavations in African American Dance*. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.

⁸⁵Used from an interview with McIntyre found in Goler’s chapter “utilize the body in unconventional ways to achieve the desired sound.” “Moves on Top of Blues” (pg. 212)

⁸⁶Lawrence, G. (2021, August 3). “In the Wake of Our Shadow: Black Voices, Dianne McIntyre” [Internet]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wKB3I3DIOA> (Time 3:27-3:40)

⁸⁷Voler, 209

McIntyre's view of the dance and the music as one connects back to ritual African principles. In an interview, she speaks about her work reflecting the African American experience. Some works are personal narrative reflections of her life, while others are stories of the people.⁸⁸

“They can recognize themselves in the work...it touches their heart, or inspires, or it educates...you see yourself in classics.”⁸⁹ “underneath something you are supposed to understand.[...]in the arts we get to learn about ourselves in the world [...] you brought me into a world, and that world is not too different from mine! ‘Oh, we feel the same thing!’”⁹⁰ - Dianne McIntyre (2021)

Telling the stories of the people through poetics and song is reminiscent of the West African Griots, who were known for their ability to tell spellbinding stories of their history and heritage. Every word of a griot is inspired by daily life and their folklore to tell these stories. Like the blues musician, a griot pulls from the events of the past, present, and future while adding a dramatic flair to keep the story interesting. Hurston, in literary works like *Mules and Men*, acts as a griot, collecting, sharing, and publishing Black American folklore as a mode of preservation.⁹¹ None of her writing is absent from a connection to music in representing Black life. She presents music as the backbone of Black culture. Cynthia S'thembile West, a scholar of contemporary African dance practices, explains how McIntyre falls into this African and African American griot tradition through her emphasis on the complexities that exist in African American life and jazz/blues music.⁹²

Dr. S. Ama Wray featured McIntyre in her doctoral dissertation as an artist who used rhythmic patterns in tandem with vocalizations to heighten her bodily expression, an element Wray discovered in her own practice. McIntyre and Wray both work with live musicians as an

⁸⁸ *In the Wake of Our Shadow: Black Voices*, Dianne McIntyre (Time 21:48-22:30)

⁸⁹ *In the Wake of Our Shadow: Black Voices*, Dianne McIntyre (Time 30:00-32:30)

⁹⁰ *In the Wake of Our Shadow: Black Voices*, Dianne McIntyre (Time 01:04:40-01:05:00)

⁹¹ Hurston, Z. N. 1935. *Mules and Men*. Philadelphia. J.B. Lippincott Co.

⁹² S'thembile West, C. (1996). “Dianne McIntyre: A Twentieth Century African American Griot.” In *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry* (pp. 131–143). African World Press.

added layer of world-building and improvisational practice. Though Wray's work is also based on improvisation as community, it takes a different approach focused on West African forms of expression. Reflecting on the operation of improvisation in African dance and music, she asserts that "rhythm is key to deducting a hypothetical model of improvisation-as-performance. It is clear that it is not music alone that furnishes dance improvisation."⁹³ From this theory, Wray began to use ethnographic research from different regions in Africa to determine how improvisation physically materializes in certain types of West African performance.

There are six components Wray proposes as a model of improvisation-as-performance: dynamic rhythm, fractal code, inner sensing and balance, play and decision-making, collaborative competition, and audience proxemics. There is a flow that develops between the performers, and a dynamic energy that can be felt rising from the audience as they observe. After participating in the creative process of her work during her Embodiology® movement intensive, I found similarities in the structure of vernacular dances, such as the simultaneous attention to the *internal and external*.⁹⁴ I used some of her methods of improvisation as choreographic tools in *Freedom's Cadence*, trying to make sense of creating movement material that interplays with various concepts. We first established movements extracted from one phrase to repeat and expand upon. In a group improvisation session, we took information from the music and each other as stimuli for variation. The circularity of receiving inspiration and being the inspiration from which another dancer *communicates* back creates a special wave of connection through the performers. Africanist Aesthetics appear in a new light with Wray's experimentation. Rhythm as

⁹³Wray, S. A. "Towards Embodiology : Modelling Relations between West African Performance Practices, Contemporary Dance Improvisation and Seselelame." University of Surrey, 2017 (Dissertation Submission)

⁹⁴Wray, S. A., *Embodiology: A Hybrid Neo-African Improvisation-as-Performance Practice Distinguished by Dynamic Rhythm*, in Vida L. Midgelow (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*, Oxford Handbooks (2019; online edition, Oxford Academic)

the basis for improvisation is coded in socio-political and historical contexts that breed a need for a deep-rooted embodied practice. It is embedded in resistance and emerges as acts of freedom while sending energy to each other across the stage, keeping a connection with the community. These embodied rhythmic practices synergistically unite the diasporic community by employing African principles as the basis of connecting interpersonally through movement.

Furthermore, the way Wray attends to language within choreography is mostly based on the cadence of the language. Her performance intertwines speaking with the movement as an act of improvisation and new building of neurological pathways. It is like an embodied version of the talking drum; the inflection of the word dictates its meaning through movement. These words that Wray uses consist of conversations with the audience or basic exchanges of words between dancers on the stage. The words are not dressed up for the stage but rather find the beauty in the full-bodied articulation of the word. Similar to Wray, Hurston had an infatuation with language. In particular, Black American vernacular, treating it as if it were poetry found in nature. She believed in its unique ability to say more implicitly through its use of exaggeration in metaphor and sliding syllables. All of Hurston's plays and novels use vernacular language as a full representation of Black culture through its cadence. Hurston and Wray both use words as textural components in their work. I follow in their footsteps, placing movement based on the cadence of poetry and spoken word inside of my thesis presentation.

Another artist who deals with cadence in gestural language is Camille A. Brown. Like McIntyre, Brown's extensive career includes work in theater, television, and film. Her diverse repertoire is inspired by connecting ancestral knowledge and movement with contemporary contexts.⁹⁵ Brown effortlessly interweaves African diasporic dance styles while telling stories

⁹⁵“About | Camille A. Brown.” Camille A. Brown, www.camilleabrown.org/camille. Accessed 3 Apr. 2026.

about the Black experience. As a part of my research for *Freedom's Cadence*, I saw her work *Black Girl: Linguistic Play*, which focuses on the intricacies of rhythm in dance, music, and hand game traditions, including double dutch. Inside of Brown's movement as "linguistic play," she pulls vocabulary from "Juba, buck and wing, social dances and other percussive corollaries of the African drum found on this side of the Atlantic."⁹⁶

The work is split into three duets depicting three different relationships: friends, sisters, and mother/daughter. *Black Girl* takes the audience through by using music, media, and visual art as representations of the time period, while the costumes and display of familiar relationships keep us situated in the present. Rhythm is visual in the timing of the gestural language and can be heard through the *Juba*-inspired body percussion. Movement material for this work was built in collaboration with the original cast, dancers, and musicians, with improvisational elements. Each time a new cast performs, the choreography shifts with them. During the talkback after the show with the cast members, they note how there is elasticity inside of the work due to embedded improvisation, with each performance different even with the same cast. This resulted in more authentic relationships between the characters on stage. Brown's work reinforced my desire to use rhythm as communication in my thesis presentation. What I appreciate about her choreography is the ability to layer details of expression. I aimed to emulate Brown by providing the audience with as many details as I could, giving texture to the performance. Asking them to stay present in their witnessing to peel back those layers.

Like Hurston, Brown's work is tied to black theatrical performance. Most notably is her work on *Porgy and Bess*, originally premiered in 1935, known as the first American opera.

Though this opera was composed and written by three white people, George Gershwin, Ira

⁹⁶“Black Girl: Linguistic Play Reference and Resource Guide.” *Black Girl: Linguistic Play*. Camille A. Brown [Artist website]. Accessed 3 Apr. 2026. <https://www.camilleabrown.org/repertory/black-girl?rq=black%20girl>

Gershwin, and Dorothy Heyward, it is set in a fictional Black American community, Catfish Row, and features an all-black cast. Choreographing this opera requires some deep knowledge of vernacular dance and music, while having sensitivity to the swing of jazz music. One scene called the “Promise Land,” recalls Hurston's ethnographic study of a Black church. This scene is about releasing the residents of their hardships after the death of someone close to them. It is filled with jumping, spinning, call and response, body percussion, and images of shouting.⁹⁷ In the wake of a passing on, the residents rejoice in their belief that they will overcome the pain the natural world brings. This reflects the significance of spirituality in southern culture and ecstasy as it relates to joy.

Inspired by the work and life of Minnie Evans, Jowale Willa Jo Zollar, the founder of Urban Bush Women, created *Praise House* (1991).⁹⁸ Rather than talking about Zollar generally as an artist, I will devote time to engaging with this particular work, which was inspired by visual art. A method of creation used in my thesis presentation, which I will detail in the next chapter. This work by Zollar also reflects on the power of spirituality. It highlights the power of archival research as well as attention to ethnographic studies of Black southern culture. As I do in my thesis, Zollar is inspired by the work of a visual artist, intrigued by the intensity of Evans' artwork and the rhythm of life the art shows. *Praise House*, like most of Zollar's work, is forged from her background in theater. As a part of the black musical theater canon, African diasporic folklore and customs are woven into the production. Anita Gonzalez describes *Praise House* as recreating “the language and rhythmic patterns of the church service in both form and content.”⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Porgy and Bess. “Porgy and Bess”. Camille A. Brown [Artist website]. Accessed 3 Apr. 2026.
<https://www.camilleabrown.org/porgy-and-bess>

⁹⁸ Dash, J. (Director). (1991). *Praise House* [Short-Film; DVD]. The Criterion Channel.

⁹⁹ Gonzalez, Anita. *Jawole Zollar's Praise House and the Ecstasy of the Black Church Ritual*, *The Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, Lawrence: University of Kansas (Summer, 2004) 123-135.

This production calls upon the power of spiritual ecstasy found in Black American Church traditions. It hinges on the idea of the communication between the earthly world and the spiritual realm. Zollar expressed that while creating this work, she was thinking of the importance of subverting the ways in which we define reality and sanity, to reach beyond the “linear narrative of what it means to experience the world.”¹⁰⁰ There are motifs of community and healing through transformation.

A praise house is a small, one-room structure in which enslaved people would gather to worship, outside of their master’s white-dominated church services, with full use of body and voice. Often, there was no leader for these gatherings. These physical structures stand as a site of refusal and a symbol against the system of their white oppressors. It was the space in which enslaved people fully exercised autonomy, releasing mind, body, and spirit. Their worship would include the rhythmic and ecstatic “ring shout,” a surviving tradition from the culture of the Gullah Geechee people, native to South Carolina. In this tradition, participants move in a circle, clockwise, making a repetitive rhythm with their bodies, their voices chanting and harmonizing as an added layer of polyrhythm. One of the many folkloric elements of this production that puts Zollar in conversation with Hurston’s work in black southern culture is the use of the ring shout in the choreography of *Praise House*.

In the south, some communities still practice deep-rooted, ancestral rituals and acknowledge spiritual possession. Zollar employs “shouting” in many scenes of this work. These moments of spiritual possession are symbols for characters shedding their “individual fears and frustrations.”¹⁰¹ Dancers can be seen doing wild jumps, swirling in and out of the ground, and

¹⁰⁰ Gottschild, B. D. Zollar, Jawole Willa Jo. (2019, June 5). *Praise House (1991)* “Discussion with Julie Dash and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar” [Internet].

¹⁰¹ Zollar in *Praise House* film discussion (2019)

doing a tossing/jostling motion in their ribcage. Telia Anderson, author of *Calling on the Spirit*, constitutes shouting, specifically, as a radical, black feminist act of power and refusal.¹⁰²

Historically, in church services, women were often the ones seen catching the spirit, while men mostly stood in solidarity through vocalizations, catching the spirit if the situation really called for it.¹⁰³ This majority female production puts the key to spiritual freedom in opposition to the societal perspective that is usually white and male. This shouting movement is rapid but choreographed so that one movement interrupts the trajectory of the next. The cadence becomes unpredictable in its timing, varying between ecstatic convulsions, but the movements are repetitive in nature. This evaluation of spirituality as transformative in *Praise House* implores how black dance on a concert stage can hold folkloric values. Even inside of modern dance, Zollar petitions cultural practices as the framework for the narrative.

¹⁰²Anderson, T. U. (2023). "Calling on the Spirit: The Performativity of Black Women's Faith in the Baptist Church Spiritual traditions and its Radical Possibilities for Resistance. In H. J. Elam & D. Krasner (Eds.), *African American Performance and Theater History: A Critical Reader* (online ed.). New York, NY, 2001; online edition, Oxford Academic, 31 Oct. 2023

¹⁰³Holt, G. S. (1999). Stylin' Outta the Black Pulpit. In G. D. Caponi (Ed.), *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', & Slam Dunking: A Reader African American Expressive Culture* (pp. 331–347). University of Massachusetts Press.

SAMPLING KINESTHETICALLY: Embodiment of Texture in Visual and Literary Art

Rhythmic play and experimentation are present in Black American culture, in all elements of expression and performance. I began to question the interplay between performance and other forms of art and how they feed into each other, similar to the work of Zollar in *Praise House*.¹⁰⁴ In what ways can movement aggregate the various understandings considered by other artists? Furthermore, how is this phenomenon already present in creative practices? This embodied theorizing brings together the ideas of intertextuality in literature with the concept of 'signifyin' proposed by Henry Louis Gates Jr.

Intertextuality generally refers to the relationship between two or more texts that focuses on influence and inspiration.¹⁰⁵ This strategy analyzes contemporary works by framing it based on the innovations found in literary works that have preceded them. The contexts of the earlier literary texts then serve to uncover possible intentions of the contemporary authors. My tie of Black existentialism to creative, artistic, and embodied practice offers the same positionality of analysis. That it is possible to trace impetus and choice making through historical structuring found in music, dance, and visual art. Signifyin' or signifyin(g), according to Gates, is a practice where Black creatives "repeat and reverse" earlier texts while creating new meaning.¹⁰⁶ This theorizing is found in my analysis of Black churches, jook joints, and House clubs as sacred spaces of rhythmic performances. They all hold the same value with different situational meanings. I have found reaching across mediums to be fruitful in exposing a textural component revealed in the "choreography" of Black art beyond dance. Throughout *Freedom's Cadence* are

¹⁰⁴Dash, J. (Director). (1991). *Praise House* [Short-Film; DVD]. The Criterion Channel.

¹⁰⁵Landwehr, M. "Introduction: Literature and the Visual Arts; Questions of Influence and Intertextuality." *College Literature* 29, no. 3 (2002)

¹⁰⁶Gates, Henry Louis. "The 'Blackness of Blackness': A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey." *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 4 (1983): 685–723.

odes to the work of different artists, which served as inspiration for rhythmic exploration. Each artist's contribution helped shape the movements into a layered and texturally complex work. Among these many artists are names such as Augusta Savage, Aaron Doglass, and Nikki Giovanni. With these works, I felt like a DJ, sampling parts of the work through movement and remixing based on the inspiration that I received. I am calling this textural analysis and choreographic device sampling kinesthetically. I will highlight the works that are substantial markers in my work.

The Breakdown

Initial research working with visual art began with the iconic painting "Sugar Shack" by Ernie Barnes, created in 1976.¹⁰⁷ This painting encapsulates the visual of a Jook Joint, the shoddy confines where Blues was born. I first saw this image in my father's apartment as a small print. I was always enamored with the elongated bodies that seemed to blend, needing to closely examine the painting to see where one body ends and another begins. All of the black bodies feature fantastical curves that animate the static scene; there are no hard lines. Their limbs extend beyond their person. What really draws me into this piece is the faces of the patrons on the dance floor. Though their bodies are close enough to feel each other's breath and their limbs are intertwined, each dancer is looking away from all the others in the room. Even the musicians have their eyes closed. On their faces is a look of self-indulgence, self-content, and self-witnessing; there is joy. Reenters, ecstasy.

This image of ecstasy was used as the opening for the first group section of *Freedom's Cadence*. I previously created a solo which drew from the Sugar Shack painting, juxtaposing the smooth and slow movements with the intense rhythm and lyrics of a hip hop song. As a result,

¹⁰⁷Barnes, E. (1976). "The Sugar Shack" [Acrylic on canvas].

the audience was drawn into the smaller details of the movement due to its quiet subtleties. To build this image with my cast, I asked them to first choose a dancer from the painting to imitate. Feeling the finite details of their original poses, they created more, always looking for the “ugly” version rather than the one they would think is the most visually appealing. I asked them to make poses that offered no straight lines for the onlooker. We experimented with shifting from one pose to another as a form of improvisation. How can they move through each pose without disturbing the flow? The goal was to accent the in between, not the pose itself. These shifting poses were beautiful on their own, but the texture of the bodies in close proximity invited the eye to see the energy that reaches beyond the poses. There is keen awareness of the edges of the poses. Reference to this improvisational shifting is introduced in the opening but found throughout the work in transitional moments.

Based on the words of James Baldwin’s poem, “Untitled,” I built what we lovingly call the “Waterfall Section.” For the first time in this work, the dancers are in one line. They face flat towards the audience, and there is complete stillness in the space. There is no sound, except for the breaths of the dancers. It creates a soundscape as they move to live. The waterfall section holds a tender moment of reconciling with oneself. This is the holdtime of the work. The silence. There are images of pulling, reaching, shifting the space, sinking, falling, and rising. It is waterlike but once again demonstrates a cycle. The dancers end standing with their backs facing the audience. How Baldwin’s poem is printed also gives information about the textures of the phrase. The intentional indentation for words versus lines led me to read the poem with care, as a map for the emotionality. In turn, the phrase articulates the body and accents movements in unexpected ways than what has been seen so far.

What gives shape to this section is the improvisational task for the dancers to move in whatever timing they *feel*. Each body is held in community through the structure of the phrase, but free to shift in time. Sometimes in reaction to someone else's impulse, other times in complete harmony with their inner self. The waterfall never *fell* the same. Each night, I saw a new being on the stage. Two movements capture the energy of the phrase: (1) when the dancers' backs face the audience as they seemingly cut through the thickness of the air, and (2) when they rhythmically sink towards falling. These moments are improvised within the already existing score but represent the individuality of a life lived, of a journey. When the dancers are doing this intricate slicing of the air, shaping the space, and sculpting these extravagant, yet imaginary, structures with their arms, it isn't expected that they will eventually arrive in the same place. There is a huge build into a quiet arrival to reflect. Shifting from this personal moment into the rhythmic sinking is the first time the audience gets to witness the dancers' preference in rhythm. Each break is led by their impulse. It serves as an acknowledgement of the moments in life that weigh us down. It is honest. Yet, it is not sad. It feels therapeutic. It is a moment of showing resilience. Always returning stronger than when the cycle began, and, most importantly, it is a demonstration and witnessing of refusal.

The final section was meant to be a large crescendo at the end of the story. I wanted to show that the Black experience is not traumatic; it is not a sad ending. I used Alma Thomas' painting, "Resurrection" (1966), as a spatial pattern for the rippling that happens between individuals, how energy is passed from one person to the next.¹⁰⁸ Examining how I can make the energy of the movement vibrate the space, like the timbre of the painting. Thomas' paintings are known for their breathtaking colors as well as rhythmic, staccato strokes distinguished as

¹⁰⁸Thomas, A. (1966). Resurrection [Painting, acrylic and graphite on canvas].

gestural abstraction, bringing music-like composition to static images. She once said, “Color is life. Light is the mother of color. Light reveals to us the spirit and living soul of the world through colors.”¹⁰⁹ Looking at the picture from afar, you can see the strokes as one color, but upon closer inspection, she has actually layered multiple colors in order to create the desired effect from one block of color. Complexity that cosplays as simplicity. The dancers swirl in and out of unison, sometimes without any inclination to the audience, and will drop back into synchronicity. Inside this section, the dancers are riding off the energy of the testimony that has happened before. They are moved by the dancer's battle with corporeality and get caught up in the spirit with the soloist. It transports them into a state separate from reality.

My goal was to give the audience everything to look at. There is something delicious about the opportunity to have a movement demand your attention, snatching you from another moment in time. It invokes the time loop inside of the previous duet; all of these beautiful happenings exist in the same moment. The stage is full. Full of bodies, movement, and color, for six straight minutes. This feels similar to all of my favorite abstract paintings. Visual artists submerge themselves in the details of the work, but the meaning behind those efforts is often not explicit in its expression. It is the onlooker's job to see deeper than the image presented.

There are callbacks to the movement vocabulary from other sections of the work in this final section. It was an accumulation of all the experiences the bodies had been through on the stage. Reaching a point of freedom where they can recognize where their journey began. But this is not an ending; it is the beginning of a new journey. For this reason, I could not imagine an ending to this work. What does it mean to build the energy of these joyous loops, only to let them come to a full stop? Instead, I wanted the audience to fully visualize the liveliness of a loop

¹⁰⁹“Wind, Sunshine, and Flowers.” Brooklyn Museum, www.brooklynmuseum.org/objects/1562.

as the final image, that the rhythm of life is continuous. My desire was for the audience to be drawn deeper to the power of a loop.

Dancers have two phrases that seamlessly blend into one another, while spatially, the bodies oscillate around one another. These phrases were prompted by the sculpture “Thornbush Blues Totem” (1990) by John T. Scott.¹¹⁰ Scott’s sculpture is characterized as a visual representation of jazz and blues. He uses small strips of metal, all folded in different forms and directions, further differentiated by bright colors. Deep angles, waves, horizontal lines, deep curves, and an array of tiny details. The various elements of this sculpture are all meticulously put together. The Smithsonian American Art Museum says, “For him, interval rhythm, and space are interdependent elements in a swirling dance of color and form.”¹¹¹

At the peak of their exhaustion, the dancers must reach from somewhere deeper to propel themselves through space and time. They must elevate their awareness of each other to keep the vitality of the work moving. It brings together internal motives while tending to external stimuli. Sensing and witnessing on new terms. The dance begins before the audience is aware of it and continues after the audience leaves. Illusion of the loop is maintained to send the audience away from the performance recalling how they have come to understand rhythm in their lives. Reinforcing the concept that cultural knowledge of rhythm is carried with the individual.

¹¹⁰Scott, J. (1990). “Thornbush Blues Totem” [Painted Steel]. Smithsonian American Art Museum.

¹¹¹Smithsonian American Art Museum, americanart.si.edu/artwork/thornbush-blues-totem-33913each other,.

VARIATION THROUGH FEELIN: A Conclusion

“At certain times I have no race, I am me...I belong to no race or time, I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.”¹¹² – Zora Neale Hurston (1928)

Before the curtains rise the dancers are already in rhythm with one another, moving on the stage before the audience is aware of their presence. Music enters the space calling their attention, then the curtain rises, and finally lights illuminate the bodies on the stage. There is a soloist on stage right and a slow-moving mass of bodies to the left. Kevin Carrol, the opening soloist, is seen reaching up to the sky, letting the reach lift him to the tips of his toes then giving into the weight of gravity, breaking into a new shape. Then the movement transforms into an exploration of journeying from one point to another. His improvisational score was to think about moving in segments, focusing on the articulation of the joints, pausing as it *feels* necessary. A flurry of notes pulls him out of this sifting through space and time to realign with the call of the music. They belong to no race or time. This solo was choreographed to rhythmically play with the *feeling* of the music. Sometimes it tries to help the audience *see* the notes through the movement, like the work of Dianne McIntyre, and other times interpolating a new cadence as the melody. With every step there was space for the dancer to add what he needed in that moment.

The "Testimony" solo was also similarly constructed and performed. They could not be beholden to any specific cadence of the movement. If performed by any other persons, these solos would be drastically different. Each dancer has a life, unbeknownst to the audience, which has led them to this moment of witnessing. Both solos are structured around improvisational components that rely on the dancer's feeling in the moment. Though they had taken this spiritual journey many times before, the movement created an opportunity to rediscover the pathways of their body.

¹¹²West, Genevieve, and Henry Louis Gates Jr., eds. "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." In *You Don't Know Us Negroes and Other Essays*, by Zora Neale Hurston. HarperCollins Publishers, 2022.

Allowing their embodied knowledge to reinterpret all the spaces of the in-between. The audience witnesses a new version of the self in each performance. Through physical ecstasy and propelled by the loops, the two soloists' bodies broke through the boundaries of time to discover alternative realities.

What does it mean to *feel* through something? Bettina Judd, an interdisciplinary artist of poetry and visual art (and a University of Maryland alumni) is the author of *Feelin: Creative Practice, Pleasure, and Black Feminist Thought*.¹¹³ In this book Judd argues that “Black women’s creative production is feminist knowledge production produced by registers of affect she calls 'feelin.'”¹¹⁴ After reading this profound book, I was able to hear Judd speak about her own creative process during an in-class conversation at the University of Maryland.¹¹⁵ She described her book as an attempt to meet the culture where it is instead of looking for a linear solution in academia that may dismiss the importance of their intersectionality. Judd’s approach to this conversation calls on a wide scope of black feminist practices as the center of the discussion instead of separating artists from each other based on art mediums. She displays vulnerability in offering her own work for analysis alongside these other artists.

I am called to use Judd in my conclusion as she bridges the gap between unrelated topics, putting them in conversation with one another. Reading this book gave me reassurance in my endeavor to make connections across art mediums. Yes, *Freedom’s Cadence* started as an exploration of joy. Listening to Black music and participating in Black dance practices filled me with a familiar feeling of joy that I yearned to understand. “I get the same feeling dancing at a

¹¹³Judd, B. *Feelin: Creative Practice, Pleasure, and Black Feminist Thought*. Northwestern University Press, 2023.

¹¹⁴“Bettina Judd - About Me in Third Person.” Bettina Judd, [Artist’s Website], www.bettinajudd.com/bettina. Accessed 6 Apr. 2026.

¹¹⁵Bettina Judd spoke at a Spring 2026 class at the University of Maryland with Prof. Elsa Barkley Brown called “Special Topics in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; Black Women's Art and Culture.”

club as I do in church” and “When I do this, I just *feel* Black.”¹¹⁶ Judd reveals that my cryptic sense of rhythm is a result of responsive knowledge production, reclaiming information from loops of the past.

In her introduction to the book, she discusses feelings as sacred knowledge that is related to oneness, transcending the body in space and time that reaches beyond the present. Feelin found in Judd’s book is directly related to memory and past processing. For me, feelin also deals with embodied listening before choosing to engage. This process becomes an act of self-understanding. M. Jacqui Alexander, activist and scholar of women and gender studies, says “Spirit brings knowledge from past, present, and future to a particular moment called now.”¹¹⁷ Judd mentions pleasure as a *feeling* that is both “individualized and relational, embodied and spiritual,” inviting *ecstasy* into the conversation. Pleasure relates to what it means to be human. As an already taboo subject, the dichotomy of black and female further excludes them from expressing and professing this “feelin.” Black women must find a way to combat the denial of their pleasures, discussed throughout the book as revealed in black feminist creative practices. Judd echoes Aisha Finch’s perspective of the intersectionality of black feminist practice as inventive in its approach to traditional understandings of survival.

When I asked Judd about the reasoning behind choosing emotion as the connective tissue between these artists’ practices, she mentioned what it means to be considered human; art as transformative and interacting with mind, body, and soul. She referred to feelings as “psycho-somatic” sensations of the social world. It is the external stimuli of witnessing art being affected by internal understanding, while at the same time the internal is affected by the external. I am

¹¹⁶Phrases that I heard in passing while in dance classes that resonate with me, part of the initiation for this research. Also, a looped reference from the Introduction chapter.

¹¹⁷Judd, p.11

looking at dance from a similar lens in my thesis research. Discovering how witnessing and performing rhythmic accentuations gives way to emotion and memories of the past to allow reflection on the present. The creation of art is a declaration of existence that contributes to the knowledge of the future and affirms the experiences of the past. How the loops of Blackness pause reality for moments to *feel* existence. *Feelin'* like *Freedom's Cadence* investigates what it means to live. Silence means death.

Continued development in my research revealed the joy of Black expression through color—colorful language, ornate choices in design, and rhythmically based movement that uniquely paints the world. My original concept was to build an abstract visual artwork on the proscenium stage. *Freedom's Cadence* resulted in something more. We found dance as a refusal of time, its rhythm as a practice of freedom, establishment of community, and a conduit of hope. I reckoned with the *yeeeeooww!* in my spirit. Layering of rhythmic loops and its connection to spirituality became the keystone of my thesis presentation. Inside the entirety of the work, *Freedom's Cadence*, the choreography obliges the dancers to push their boundaries on their perception of time and its relationship to rhythm. Joy in the Black experience was demonstrated through physical ecstasy, propelled by connection of bodies beyond time and space.

I want to return to Judd's theorization of Black feminist creative practices in *Feelin'*, where in one chapter, she frames the intersections of Blackness, spirituality, and joy in the work of poet Lucille Clifton. Judd details Clifton's intimate relationship with spirituality and its role in producing her atheology of joy. Inside of archival material from Clifton's writing practices are her encounters with "the Ones."¹¹⁸ She is influenced by these spirits who speak directly with her, and Clifton uses writing as one of the ways to heighten her connection to the Ones. In her many

¹¹⁸Judd, p.75-77

poems that consider the relationship between Eve, Lucifer, and God, Clifton is thinking about humanity in terms of self-making, and each character's ability to create. In an interview, Clifton once said to refuse joy is to sin against "what made us."¹¹⁹ Minnie Evans, the inspiration for Urban Bush Women's *Praise House*, also talks about her painting as a connection to her Angels. These Angels were Evans' vision who told her to "paint or die." *Silence means death*. For both Clifton and Evans, their understanding of spirituality became a reflection of their work and their positionality on joy. Embodiment of *feeling* through artistic practice they used to transcend beyond the present. Their experience of joy could only be described through their point of view:

"Feelin is not foreclosed. [...] The point is that you feel how it moves along, the motivation, the tools, and the experience that leads to the conclusion. [...] Because feelin is not foreclosed knowledge, it has room for those who feel it and those who don't. As a theory in the flesh, it is both rooted in physical reality *and* mutable. Open for revisions, it thrives in *both/and*."¹²⁰ - Bettina Judd (2023)

Oppressed people do not dance and sing because they are happy or content with their situation, they have instead mastered adapting and creating. In Clifton's atheology of joy, according to Judd, there must be a wholehearted acknowledgement of the wholeness of existence which includes suffering.¹²¹ There can be no concept of joy without *knowing* the experience of suffering.

As a final ode to the meditation on loops inside of *Freedom's Cadence*, I started this conclusion with a description of the opening solo. What is a conclusion if not a return to the introduction? This solo became a variation of itself in every performance. It was a marker of a new iteration of *Freedom's Cadence*, a time warp of performance inside of the dancer's lives. On the day of the final run, this work was on its eleventh repetition. For the audience, however, this

¹¹⁹Judd, p.77

¹²⁰Judd, p.74

¹²¹Judd, B. "Lucille Clifton's Atheology of Joy!" In *Feelin: Creative Practice, Pleasure, and Black Feminist Thought*. Northwestern University Press, 2023.

experience was a departure from their usual Sunday afternoon, a cut. To enhance the dancer's sense of *feeling* and *knowing* within *Freedom's Cadence* and its loops, I encouraged the dancers to find new ways to take a familiar path. Like the improvisational score in the opening solo.

Each performance I gave the dancers a new "task" to complete. The first task asked for them to dance for one another. Acknowledging how they give and receive energy. I asked them to experiment with sending their energy out to everyone on the stage, not focused on who is in the audience. Another prompt was to imagine they are the color that is painting the space. I asked them to leave every bit of color their beautiful souls bring into this world on the stage. But, by far, my favorite night of performance came from the instruction to find a moment to *live*. The ways in which I could see the vibrational energy of each dancer expand as they went to *get their life* on the stage, was enough to bring tears to my eyes. It was a witnessing of full transcendence. From dancers on a stage, transformed to new beings through the power of moving in rhythmic synchrony and synergy with one another. Stamping the world with proof of their existence; living beyond the present.

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