

The Commodification and Appropriation of African-American Vernacular Dances

Danielle Jacobowitz

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Education

University of Washington

2016

Committee:

Janine Jones

Deborah McCutchen

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

College of Education

©Copyright 2016
Danielle Jacobowitz

University of Washington

Abstract

The Commodification and Appropriation of African-American Vernacular Dances

Danielle Jacobowitz

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Janine Jones, PhD, NCSP

Educational Psychology

African-Americans historically have learned dance through observation, participation, and social/community ties. This is the very definition of *situated learning*. Lindy hop and blues dance are two social dances which were created by and for African-Americans. Lindy hop and blues dance instructors and organizers have codified and commodified these historical African-American social dances, which has affected the composition of the community of learners, thus creating cultural erasure and placing undue focus on the preservation, and not the evolution, of these dances. Adopting pieces of an art that is historically linked to a culture without understanding the depth of that link is a kind of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation goes beyond offending people; it continues patterns of disempowering groups of people who are already marginalized. Cultural appropriation is a common problem in African-American history, and dance is no exception (Young, 2010).

Literature Review

In this thesis project, a focus will be placed on learning as a social practice within a community, and the effects of learning outside that community. To provide background for this focus, it will be useful to know a brief history about experiential education, situated learning, and legitimate peripheral participation. Since “social dancing links African-Americans to their African past more strongly than any other aspect of their culture,” it will also be useful to have a broad understanding of how dance was learned in West Africa, as well as how and why dance developed during the time of slavery (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990, p. 3). There has been very little research conducted on the commodification of modern lindy hop and blues dance, and so inferences have been made from the research on the commodification of mambo/salsa. In lieu of research on blues dance in particular, interviews with instructors and organizers have been conducted to illustrate how African-American culture is currently being integrated in instruction.

Experiential Learning or Learning By Doing

Experiential learning, or learning by doing, is an umbrella term to define a philosophy of learning that occurs outside mainstream education (e.g. public schools). It describes a method in which educators engage learners directly with focused reflection.

Many different currents of experiential education exist. Aristotle believed that the experience of the senses was more important than reason, while rationalists disparaged the subjectivity of the senses. Enlightenment thinkers did not believe in an innate goodness of the individual but assumed, instead, that culture helped to shape the learning experience of an individual. Similarly, the Santee Sioux believed that one could not learn without the guidance of one’s community. Romantic thinkers, on the other hand, believed that culture corrupted the individual and that true education could only be reached through solitude. John Dewey’s take on

experiential education was a well-balanced blend of pragmatic science and artistic experience that focused on developing freedom of thought. He believed that nothing existed in a vacuum - literacy, social norms, and social ties were all part of one's environment. He heavily critiqued the authoritarian style of teaching commonly found in public schools, calling for more focus on the student's learning experience. Experiential education as a philosophy places student engagement highest on the list of priorities (Roberts, 2012).

Situated Learning or Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Situated learning has more to do with learning within a social context. In the foreword to Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's (1991) book *Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*, William F. Hanks says, "Learning is a process that takes place in a participation framework, not in an individual mind (p. 15)." Situated learning focuses on how learning occurs in a social environment, thus stressing the environment more than an individual's cognition. To tie into experiential education, situated learning would fall under the enlightenment current, which focuses on how culture and society can shape a person's learning experience. Instead of viewing society as a shaper of learning, it can be argued that the philosophy of situated learning understands the learning process as a specific kind of social practice. The emphasis on learning within one's community is the core tenet.

Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) is the central defining component of situated learning. LPP is the process by which a novice learns by watching, participating, and eventually becoming the master. It is based in apprenticeship, but there is more focus on the novice learner's participation and the culture/community where that participation takes place. LPP is based in experiential education, as it is literally learning by doing; it is also solidly set in a social framework (i.e. situated learning). To differentiate, LPP is a social practice of learning by

periphery (i.e., by watching) and then by doing. Experiential education is often called "learning by doing" and it is an educational methodology. Situated learning is easy to recognize in dance education, as dance is often learned by watching and then by doing. It is especially common to learn vernacular dances within a community. Therefore, dance and LPP go hand-in-hand.

Dance and LPP

Dance is the ideal topic in which to discuss situated learning and the effects on learning as the culture and community changes over time. While dance scholars do not use the same terminology to define situated learning, they are describing the same educational process. Dance is taught almost exclusively by peripheral watching and physical participation, which are the defining components of LPP. Dance is a kinesthetic topic, and one that must be learned by application. At the very heart of "learning by doing" is the idea that one cannot fully expect to understand a topic by rote memorization, but by practicing (Roberts, 2012). This idea of practice lends itself easily to legitimate peripheral participation, where novice dancers are expected to attempt, fail, and grow as part of the learning process. Furthermore, social dance is commonly learned from one's family and community, giving credence to the term a "community of practice" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 56). Dance scholars use the terms "learning by cultural immersion" or "learning at home" (J. McMains, Ph.D, personal communication, April 4, 2016). Situated learning is not an educational form or pedagogical strategy, but is instead defined by the social engagements and places where the learning takes place (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Heretofore, references to learning at home or cultural immersion will be used interchangeably with LPP.

African Dance and LPP

Lindy hop and blues dance originated from African dance. When West Africans were enslaved by European-American people, they brought with them movements that were very different from the polished, poised aesthetic of European-American dances. It is worth dedicating some time to illustrate the depth, breadth, and importance of dance in West African culture. For pre-Civil War America, the term “enslaved Africans” will be used instead of “slaves” to place emphasis on the heritage of those who were forced into slavery and not on their enslavement. The term “plantation owner” will be used instead of “slave owner” to delegitimize the concept that anyone can own another person. Post-Emancipation, people will be defined by their heritage, either with the term “African-American” or “European-American” (Moore, 2010).

In West Africa, musical training begins early in a child’s life. It is present in cradle songs, on the backs of relatives at work and at festivals, and in the rhythmic games children learn (Malone, 1996). Because dance is such an integral part of religious ceremonies, dance proficiency is required of all individuals in West African society. Dance expertise is so important that if candidates for public office lack skill, they must undergo several months of instruction before they are allowed to take office (Hazard-Gordon, 1990). In Africa, improvisation is encouraged only after the dances are mastered with precision, performed in front of and appreciated by spectators, and sanctioned by elders (Welsh-Asante, 2000). The novice dancers must learn from more proficient dancers until they are proficient enough to teach those who are not yet skilled. Individualized instruction is the exception; the way most West Africans learn dance is through their community as an integral part of social life.

The Significance of Learning Dance During Slavery

For enslaved Africans, community-based learning was imperative to the survival of dance. Plantation owners recognized that by controlling the enslaved Africans’ culture, they

helped ensure subordination, but they were not entirely successful. For example, enslaved Africans were denied access to drums, but rhythmic singing, stomping, and instrument playing persevered (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990). Legislation denied enslaved Africans a formal education, so they passed on knowledge to each other by word of mouth and demonstration (Papa, Gerber, & Mohamed, 2008). Observing and then gradually increasing in engagement and participation are the defining tenets of LPP (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Social learning through participation was especially poignant in dance, as dance was difficult to learn by word of mouth. Furthermore, the splitting up of families during the time of slavery resulted in community bonding. These bonds further encouraged learning through social interactions, as there was perceived strength in numbers and common mores.

The cakewalk. Enslaved Africans frequently responded to the tyrannical authority of plantation owners with subversive resilience. An example of this response can be found in a dance called *the cakewalk*. Enslaved Africans first learned *the cakewalk* by observing the poised, upright dances of the plantation owners. They then added embellishments that mimicked their work environment, such as “pitchin’ hay” and “corn shuckin’” (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990, p. 19). Learning from one’s environment is a defining aspect of situated learning.

Enslaved Africans then used the dance to make mocking commentary of the plantation owners, turning the dance into both a performance for plantation owners as well as a way to signal freedom of thought to other enslaved Africans. A former enslaved African described *the cakewalk* to the actor Leigh Whipper: “Us slaves watched white folks’ parties where the guests danced a minuet and then paraded in a grand march, with the ladies and gentlemen going different ways and then meeting again, arm in arm, and marching down the center together. Then we’d do it, too, but we used to mock ‘em every step. Sometimes the white folks noticed it, but

they seemed to like it; I guess they thought we couldn't dance any better." (Hazzard-Gordon, 1996, p. 18).

Lave and Wenger (1991) frequently described learning as a special kind of social practice. *The cakewalk* was taught within the community as part of a powerful social practice called "duality." Historian Robert Hinton (1988) explained that during the time of slavery, enslaved Africans' dance split into two types. One was the dance that enslaved Africans created for themselves, which was more African in movement vocabulary and quality, as well as in who the dance was intended for. The other dance was the one created for the plantation owners, which was decidedly more European in aesthetic. In this second type of dance, the experience of the performers was secondary to that of the audience. *The cakewalk* was performed for both audiences, which embodied the social practice of duality. With the presence of African movement still extant in the cakewalk, plantation owners were either not aware of or did not fully understand the presence of mockery, or derision. Plantation owners instead chose to view the enslaved Africans as simplistic, dim-witted, and happy-go-lucky, a dehumanizing view which was later presented in minstrel shows (Pilgrim, 2016).

In this dance, learning had a quintessentially social character, as it encouraged a powerful nonverbal communication that strengthened the bonds of an extremely oppressed group of people. Duality, derision, and thus a sense of resistance, was interwoven into the educational fabric of enslaved Africans' social dance. It served the purposes of both fostering intraracial community and garnering favor of those in power by performing for culturally illiterate plantation owners (Defrantz, 2004).

Surviving principles of African dance. Some technical and aesthetic principles of West African dance which survived slavery include shouting, asymmetrical shapes and movement,

creating angles in the body, multiple and simultaneous rhythms (polyrhythm), all parts of the body are of equal importance (polycentrism), body percussion, a back and forth interplay between two people or two groups of people called “call and response,” flat-footedness, individuality within the group, an air of apathy (aesthetic of cool), bent knees with the body tilted forward from the hips, repetition of rhythms, rounded shapes and paths of movement (curvilinear), a story arc or narrative that spans time (epic memory), and imitation of one’s environment (Welsh-Asante, 1985). Most of these cannot be taught without the involvement of others. Posture, body shapes, and rhythm cannot be taught easily without demonstration and observation. Call and response cannot be taught without another person. Individuality within a group cannot be taught without the presence of the group. Imitation of one’s environment cannot be taught without an environment to imitate. This all may seem tautological, but it emphasizes the necessity of community in the learning process of West African dance. As aforementioned, these musical and dance concepts were included in daily life since birth.

The combination of historically African community-based learning of dance, the splitting up of tribes and families, the close living quarters on plantations, and the outright denial of formal education by plantation owners necessitated the formation of strong community bonds within enslaved African culture. During slavery, dance was learned in the context of cultural immersion (also known as LPP) as a socially bonding practice within the community. Enslaved Africans spoke their minds, passions, and emotions through dance. They maintained their unique individuality and association with African culture through dance. The experience of slavery greatly affected the development of African-American dance and the social context in which it was learned.

Emancipation and the Resulting Cultural Effects

Slavery offered enslaved Africans some cultural insulation, by way of shared experience and tight living quarters. Slavery encouraged an already African code of silence, composure, and self-control, which forbade enslaved Africans to give plantation owners information about each other (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990). This insular society addressed education of all things cultural by passing down information orally and corporeally (Papa, Gerber, & Mohamed, 2008). In corporeal demonstration of dance, one would have to observe before attempting participation.

Autonomy should have given African-Americans more freedom over their lives, but plantation owners maintained control by way of work contracts. This had the added effect of relieving plantation owners of the responsibilities that once accompanied such control, such as being responsible for providing food and shelter. As a result, emancipation forced African-Americans into European-American society with ill-paying jobs and shoddy living quarters (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990). While many African-Americans experienced economic struggle, they bonded in shared cultural immersion. The increasing secession of African-American culture from European-American culture necessitated social learning. For the first time, African-Americans had the freedom to develop their own culture and learn from each other without the influence of plantation owners. African-Americans in the South held onto their African heritage, using drums, singing, and unfettered celebration in their dances (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990).

European-American Violence and Development of the Jook Joint

As the federal troops withdrew from the South in 1877, ubiquitous violence against African-Americans made a travesty of their new freedom. This unchecked violence continued until the middle of the 1900s. As a result of this terrorism and an economic depression in the South, many African-Americans traveled north. Before this mass migration, however, violence from European-Americans and economic hardship further pushed working-class African-

Americans into a close cultural group. These close cultural ties as a response to violence as well as the aforementioned code of silence present during the time of slavery led to a privatization of learning and experiencing African-American social dance (Defrantz, 2004). This cultural freedom, privatization, and reclaiming of African dance elements were responsible for the development of the jook joint, a shabby nightclub, with food, entertainment, social interaction, gambling, and liquor sales. It mimicked the clandestine nature of the dances held during the time of slavery, as it was typically advertised by word of mouth. It was a safe place where working class African-Americans could relax, connect, and learn dance with others in a culturally validating way. This cultural homogeneity had a pronounced effect on the dances that developed. Cultural immersion heavily influenced the way these dances were learned. There were no classes and no instructors. At a jook joint, dancing was a social activity.

Two things of significance occurred when jook joints began cropping up: dance steps once linked to ritual or religion developed firm secular roots, and the focus changed from group dances to individual and partnered dances. For example, *the big apple*, a secular, individual dance, derived from *the ring shout*, which was a group dance that was religious in nature. Dances in the jook joint included *the charleston*, *the shimmy*, *the snake hips*, *the funky butt*, *the twist*, *the slow drag*, *the buzzard lope*, *the black bottom*, *the itch*, *the fish tail*, and *the grind*. These dances developed simultaneously with blues music, which later influenced jazz and lindy hop. The jook joint was a place for regional and traveling African-Americans to share their emerging culture and to garner respect for their musicianship and dance skills. It was also a place for European-Americans to respectfully observe and learn some aspects of African-American culture and dance (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990). Regardless of heritage, without the presence of instructors, dancers had to learn individual (or solo) dances first by observing and then by participating.

Though the social aspect of group dancing changed to partner dancing, it can be inferred that someone had to show a new dancer how to dance by dancing with them – in effect, by expecting participation.

The honky tonk, which arose in urban areas at the same time as the jook joint, catered to European-Americans as well as African-Americans. Honky tonks placed more focus on making money through gambling or prostitution, which further differentiated it from the more rural jook joint. In terms of music and dance, the honky tonk was home to a faster style of blues which later became the name for that style of music. Music also included ragtime and early jazz. Dances included *the funky butt*, *the slop*, *the squat*, *the grind*, *the mooche*, *the slow drag*, *the eagle rock*, *the fanny bump*, and *the snake hips*. The same theoretical framework of social learning applied. While there was a more heterogeneous clientele, the culture was still one of African-American music and dance. Thus, it can be inferred that the same learning principles applied. The jook joint and honky tonk were where the blues and its corresponding dances developed (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990). The dances in jook joints and honky tonks later resurfaced in lindy hop.

The History and Revival of Lindy Hop

Lindy hop, an African-American partner dance that incorporated call and response, continuous individual rhythms, and a separating and drawing back together, developed in the 1920s and reached peak popularity in the 1930s. The Savoy Lindy Hoppers were professional performers and dancers that set the national standard for lindy hop, whilst remaining social dancers at the Savoy Ballroom. Photographs of well-dressed, African-American champion dancers “Long George” Greenidge and Ella Gibson were in the press, lending a sophisticated characterization that was an antithesis to the subtext of Hollywood movies that spread demeaning racial stereotypes (Monaghan, 2002).

The Savoy was the central hub for hearing the highest quality jazz music and experiencing the highest level of dancing. It helped shape the era's music and dance. Count Basie said that while he had seen his name on the marquee on Broadway, seeing his name in front of the Savoy was a "special thrill" (Basie & Murray, 1985, p. 201). Even to such a well-known African-American musician, the Savoy was considered in the highest regard.

Fast forward to the late 1970s / early 1980s, where the enthusiasm of a group of middle class European-Americans, with an entirely different cultural background from the African-Americans who created lindy hop, began trying to reinterpret the dance according to more performative (rather than social) set of values. Even with instructions from surviving Swing Era dancers, the most skilled dancers could not master the underlying techniques. Terry Monahan argues that this is because of the inability to grasp lindy hop's defining relationship with Harlem's Savoy Ballroom. European-Americans have a fragmented understanding of lindy hop, evidenced by their focus on replicating the "look" of the Savoy dancers in Hollywood movies without understanding that the Savoy Ballroom was a cultural center that cultivated intense creativity in the African-American community (Monaghan, 2002, p. 31). A great deal is inevitably lost when a new community of learners takes up an art form that is not originally part of their cultural background. Art is too intertwined with culture to parse as a separate entity.

Throughout the revival of swing dance, European-American dancers have focused on authenticity and historical preservation, which has ignored the roots of a dance that prizes innovation and creativity, romanticizing a racially fraught past and essentially mummifying a living art. In "Swingin' Out: Southern California's Lindy Revival," (2002) Juliet McMains and Danielle Robinson note that "one of the most unusual aspects of today's swing revival is that contemporary lindy hoppers are *obsessed* with their dance's history and its origins - theirs is a

perpetual search for the ever-elusive, authentic “swing.” The word “vintage” is a crucial term for this community, because dancers are fueled by a commitment to re-creating the past (p. 86). Due to this new set of values, concepts like innovation, respect for regional differences, duality (which included derision) were elements of early African-American dances that have not survived in the modern swing scene. If dance is a living art, the death of even a few concepts make a difference in its evolution.

The Popularization and Professionalization of Blues Dance

In a phone interview with Heidi Fite, a blues dance instructor from San Francisco, she referenced a talk she had with Frankie Manning, a Savoy era lindy hop dancer, about blues dancing in 2005. Frankie thought it was odd that the lindy hop scene was separate from the blues dance scene. He said that this was just another dance, and he didn't understand why they were separated. It wasn't called blues dance back then; it was called by the name of the dance, like the grind or the mooche. According to Fite, Frankie said, “I would go with my mother to the Savoy Ballroom and she was all dressed up and dancing all these beautiful, elegant dances. After the dance was over, we'd go back to someone's house for a rent party. She'd stick me in the coat closet so I wasn't around all the liquor, but I saw what was going on. She was out there grinding and messing around, and that was a different woman dancing! It was all the same people [who were at the Savoy], though.”

Fite also referenced a talk she had with Dawn Hampton, a Savoy era lindy hop dancer, about “white people teaching the blues.” Fite explained that Dawn saw no problem with blues being embraced by a wider and whiter culture, as long as white people approached the dance with curiosity and respect. What stood out most to Fite was when Dawn said that everyone's experiences were going to color their version of blues, and that as a result, everyone's dance

would be different. Fite explained that in the late 90s and early 2000s, there were lindy hop dancers who were enamored with the swing dance revival and with the culture that spawned the respective dance. They started wondering what other dances were around during the time lindy hop was popular. Some lindy hop dancers became interested in blues music and dance, and one way they found out about it was in *The Spirit Moves: A History of Black Social Dance on Film, 1900-1986*, a dance documentary by Mura Dehn (1987), which has an entire section on blues dancing. There is a clip of the dancers dancing to the blues at the Savoy Ballroom, and that's where Fite said the modern blues dance scene gets the term "Ballroomin'" from. In the late 90s and early 2000s, lindy hop dancers across the country were studying and dancing these dances independently from each other. At the American Lindy Hop Championships in 2001, they met and picked each other's brains about blues dancing. From that point forward, a national blues scene that was based in historical blues dances began to develop. The first national blues event was Cheap Thrills in 2003, which was in St. Louis, Missouri. That year, Fite and her teaching partner, Charlie Fuller taught it. The next year, they hired Ogden Sawyer and Marilee Annareau. In 2005, they invited every single blues dance instructor at a national level caliber who they knew at the time. This included Jerry and Kathy Warwick, Solomon Douglas, Damon Stone, and Michael Faltesek. From that point forward, new events started popping up everywhere, including Denver, Dallas, and Seattle.

Fite then described another popularization of blues dances that occurred simultaneously. Lindy hop dancers would dance all night and get tired, so they wanted to dance slower. Eventually, it became a habit of lindy hop events to have a late night "blues" room. They included some blues music, but they also included slow pop and slow R&B. The requirement was not that it had to be blues music, but that it had to be slow. This was happening at the exact

same time that some lindy hop dancers were delving into the historical basis of blues dance. It set up a dichotomy in the lindy hop scene about where modern blues dances came from. Though Fite diplomatically called the inaccurate use of the term “blues dance” a “misnomer,” this simultaneous development of a slowed down version of lindy hop danced to music that was not necessarily blues was blatant cultural appropriation. Blues music and blues dancing developed simultaneously, each heavily informing the other art form (Hazzard-Gordon, 1990). This set of lindy hop dancers separated blues music from blues dancing, which ignored the history of the origins of the dances. The unfortunate result of the aforementioned cherry picking is cultural erasure, which is especially problematic when done to a historically oppressed racial and cultural minority. Fite stated that the revival of blues dances would not have spread as far as it did without the lindy hop community base. While it might not have spread in popularity amongst European-Americans, it was still being danced by African-Americans in their own communities and homes (personal communication, Damon Stone, January 4, 2012).

The Effects of Social Exclusion on Novice and Intermediate Blues Dancers

It is worth noting that there are attempts at communities of practice in modern blues dance. They are no longer situated in African-American culture, but they are situated in modern blues dance culture. Taking blues dance out of the jook joints it developed in is a kind of cultural appropriation. It is akin to plucking a fruit from the tree where it grew. Luckily, the modern blues dance scene is composed of many instructors and organizers who strive to include the African-American roots of the dance. Because of this uprooting and repotting of blues dance, it is no longer learned through a community of practice, or by cultural immersion.

The blues experiment. The most obvious example of this is The Blues Experiment. The aim of The Blues Experiment is to create communities of practice that are experimenting and

learning through these mechanisms (Joey Shelley, personal communication, April 22, 2016).

This particular dance event is expensive, limited in number of participants, highly selective, and is marketed to dancers who can financially and timewise afford to take a week off from work. At The Blues Experiment and at national blues dance events, dancers are leveled by skill and they practice within that skill group. The idea is that dancers who attend The Blues Experiment will take their experiences back to their local dance scenes and share with dancers who did not attend. Because of the combination of tracked classes split by two skill levels; the constraints placed on number of participants and personality fit; and the the high financial and time cost, The Blues Experiment is not a good example of situated learning, but a fine example of insular social bonding that occurs among the intermediate and elite dancers in the modern blues dance scene.

Local blues dance scenes. Local blues dance scenes hold intermittent or regular practice sessions with intermediate and advanced dancers. Advanced dancers often feel an affinity with each other after years of practice and presence in the blues dance scene, which sometimes has the unwanted effect of excluding novice dancers. This exclusion, however unintentional, does not fit the description of situated learning. The more advanced dancers learn through immersive interactions with their same-level peers. Novice dancers, however, are encouraged to pay for lessons.

Often, lessons are included in the price of the dance, but the clear commodification of dance expertise is a hindrance to true situated learning. Some teachers make their living by teaching these dances. A pressing question is, without this commodification, would swing and blues have survived? Blues dance is learned through cultural immersion, but it is not the original African-American culture that current blues dancers are being immersed in; it is the modern blues dance culture. It is a culture that tries to include African-American roots, to varying levels

of success. The goal is definitely appreciation over appropriation. Perhaps the culture in which dancers are immersed has simply changed, though in changing, what has been lost? Change within a culturally based art is expected as time progresses. It is not change that is the issue, but the complete repotting of the art into an entirely different culture. Even with the best of intentions, this causes cultural erasure. Legitimate peripheral participation (LPP), which defines how the novice learns in a community of learners, is the central defining factor in situated learning. The stratification of modern blues dancers by skill in both local and national blues dance scenes is a testament to the absence of LPP, and thus the absence of true situated learning. In a true community of learners, everyone is valued, no matter their skill level. Many novice and intermediate level dancers have said over social media and in personal communication that they feel ostracized. Many local dance scenes suffer from low attendance and low levels of interest in growth. If the blues dance scene was truly cemented in situated learning, novice and intermediate level dancers would be encouraged and nurtured to become advanced level dancers, and eventually, teachers.

The Effects of Commodification on Mambo/Salsa

Mambo was clearly popular with African-Americans in Harlem; its presence at the Savoy Ballroom led to cross-over between the top lindy hop and mambo dancers. The background of the Palladium Ballroom is phenomenally similar to the Savoy Ballroom. The Savoy Ballroom was a ballroom in Harlem that encouraged intense cultural creativity in passionate and talented African-American musicians and dancers from the late 1920s to the 1940s. The Savoy Ballroom was to jazz music and lindy hop what the Palladium Ballroom was to Latin music and the mambo. “Killer Joe” Piro, an Italian-American former Lindy Hop champion, was the host and teacher of the free weekly mambo lesson. He also hosted the weekly amateur mambo dance

contest, the winners of which were judged by guest celebrities, and who would often become performers in the professional show that followed. However, most of the night was dedicated to improvised social dancing. The predominant races were African-Americans and Afro-Latinos, but Italians and Jews were also in attendance. While the Savoy Ballroom attracted European-American dancers to Harlem, the Palladium was located right on Broadway - the geographic center of New York City. The Palladium was a shining example of a community of learners, or situated learning. Novice dancers were encouraged to take the free lesson, and amateurs were encouraged to compete. If they won, they were frequently chosen as performers. Dancers shared a love for the live music and the fact that it crossed racial, generational, and class divides (McMains, 2015, p. 40).

McMains (2015) used her own personal knowledge of dancing mambo and salsa for 17 years in combination with personal interviews of young salsa dance instructors and older dancers who lived through the historical evolution of mambo to salsa. In her interview with Sonny Allen, a Savoy lindy hopper, he recalled that most of the top level dancers split their time between the Savoy and the Palladium, insisting that “the majority of your best Latin dancers doing mambo were black (p. 35).” Allen’s statement implies that the cultural immersion in which mambo and lindy hop were learned was shared between these two ballrooms, and between Latin-American and African-American dancers.

Mambo music combined African-American jazz harmonies and instrumentation with Cuban rhythms, influencing the dance with moves from lindy hop, rumba, and bomba. It should then come as no surprise that there are shared African dance values between mambo and other African-American social dances, such as a grounded posture with bent knees and the torso tilted forward at the hips, isolations, improvised solo movement, angularity, polycentrism,

polyrhythms, curvilinearity, asymmetry, individualism within a group dynamic, and the aesthetic of cool (Welsh-Asante, 1985).

The commodification of mambo has a lot of similarities with the history of lindy hop. Salsa dance developed from mambo in the 1970s as a strong political statement, connecting people from different Latino identities through musical expression. Just 15 years after the resurgence of lindy hop, in the late 90s, salsa started to transform into a multimillion dollar, international industry. This commodification had dire effects. Not only did it pit instructors against one another, all claiming the most authentic version of salsa, but it quickly extended beyond the Latin American communities it was born from as something to purchase. Furthermore, the commodification of salsa created a need for naming steps and movement that used to be unnamed. This process is called “codification.” Steps were codified in order to streamline instruction. Critics claim that this codification has destroyed the improvisational nature of salsa, which is an inarguable part of the roots of the dance and the music to which it is danced (McMains, 2015). Improvisation links salsa and lindy hop to African roots. One example of codification in lindy hop and blues dance is Joe DeMers’ article on frame matching as a way to teach partner dance connection (2012). Since commodification created a need for codification in salsa, the evidence of this codification in lindy hop and blues implies that commodification has occurred in these dances, as well.

McMains (2015) stated that “the incorporation of ballet vocabulary into mambo shows in the 1950s were perceived as elevating its class and sophistication whereas similar integration of ballet vocabulary into post-millennial salsa performances was perceived by some as too similar to ballroom dance to be considered authentic salsa (p. 6).” This focus on authenticity was, as mentioned earlier, present in the resurgence of lindy hop. Because improvisation was so

important to the roots of salsa, choreographed salsa performances were viewed by critics as something entirely separate from the origins of the dance. The social dance context links Latinos and African-Americans to their respective cultural communities.

In focusing on the evolution of mambo to salsa, McMains described the difference between Palladium-era mambo and modern New York-style salsa. Palladium-era mambo is characterized by a complex rhythmic structure, interdependence with live music, a simplicity of partnered movement which placed emphasis on the creativity of each dancer (i.e., improvisation), and a playfulness within solo movement. Modern salsa uses a simpler rhythmic structure, is danced to recorded music, and places much more emphasis on turns and conformity than creativity. Improvisation was at the very heart of mambo music and dance. Because of this, there are generational divides. While the younger generation reveres the Palladium and refers to their dancing as “mambo,” the Palladium-era dancers refer to all dancing by the younger generation as “salsa” (McMains, 2015). Many of the Palladium-era dancers McMains interviewed simultaneously believe that salsa is a mere shadow of the original mambo, and that calling the dance “salsa” robs them of any credit for being inventors of the original mambo (McMains, 2015). This is incredibly similar to what happened in lindy hop, when it was renamed “jitterbug” in the 1950s in order to encourage commodification by separating the dance from its African-American inventors (Monaghan, 2002). Commodification of both mambo/salsa and lindy hop pulled the dances away from their African roots. This repotting affected concepts such as the interdependence of dance and live music, improvisation, creativity, and even gender performance and equality (McMains, 2015).

Later effects of commodification include stripping the dance of its social focus. As young dancers who had no concept about the history of mambo and the commodification of salsa

entered the dance scene, they looked down on family “kitchen” style salsa as unsophisticated and inferior, essentially pushing out people who learned it from their relatives (Bosse, 2014). This is, yet again, another kind of cultural appropriation. Dancers do the same with lindy hop and blues. Before the professionalization of salsa bred snobbery and elitism, mambo was how people socialized. This commodification of social dance has placed emphasis on popularity and fame instead of on socializing (McMains, 2015). Because mambo/salsa was learned through cultural immersion, losing its social focus completely changed the way it was learned.

What does this say for modern blues dance? Only since 1994 has social and popular dance experienced critical dance scholarship (McMains, 2015). Though there is a dearth of literature on modern blues dance and African-American social dances that are still learned by cultural immersion, between the commodification of mambo/salsa and lindy hop, certain inferences can be drawn. With the loss of live music and the extreme focus on authenticity (though intended to be deferential), some amount of improvisation and creativity has been lost. Choosing to focus on historical replication of moves instead of the historically African-American concept of individual expression within the group is an example of cultural appropriation. In fact, vintage recreationism is the exact opposite of the individual expression that is prized by African-American culture. A sense of duality is no longer a vital part of lindy hop and blues dance, as it is not primarily danced by African-Americans for both African-American and European-American audiences. In changing cultures and generations and in being commodified, these dances have changed. The very way we learn these dances has changed. So, how do we pay homage to tradition while still encouraging creativity and innovation?

Integrating African-American History in Modern Blues Dance Instruction

A sizeable handful of blues dance scene leaders have attempted to delve into African-American history in order to understand, pay homage to, and more honestly represent the culture that blues dance has its roots in. These dancers have made a point to read books on the history of blues music and dance, as well as to hold conversations and workshops in their local dance scenes about the history of African-American culture in blues music and dance. Many others incorporate the history of blues dance into every drop-in lesson they teach (John Vigil, Laney Barhaugh, Nick DeWitt, Jen Delk, Sara Cherny, Stephen York, Aimee Eddins, Pomona Lake, & Heather Kraft, personal communication, April 22, 2016).

Seasoned blues dancer John Vigil said, “I try to discuss some aspect of culture or history in all my classes. Last year I did an event where the focus was Blues dance and where it came from. The very first class of the weekend was Damon [Stone] discussing the history and culture of Blues idiom dance. I also asked Damon to include history, culture, etc in every class he taught (John Vigil, personal communication, April 22, 2016).” His reference to Damon Stone is notable, as Stone is the one of the only African-American instructors in the modern blues dance scene who learned blues dances directly from his African-American family members.

Seasoned blues dancer Laney Barhaugh has created a space on social media called “Blackness, Whiteness and Blues,” where blues dancers can attempt to understand African-American culture through “civil, frank, open conversations about the role of race in blues and jazz music and dance.” This group in particular focuses on “[people of color] sharing experiences and being heard, sharing resources for those of us who try to act like allies, and discussing ways forward [and] not just everything that is wrong with the world” (Laney Barhaugh, personal communication, April 20, 2016).

At an international blues dance event in Chicago called bluesSHOUT!, organizer/Instructor Jen Delk and Blues Historian/Instructor Damon Stone offered a class jokingly called “Ask a Black Person.” Delk stated that since she and Stone were African-Americans that other dancers frequently sought answers from, regarding race and culture, she and Stone decided to create a class where people could discuss African-American cultural, community, and history as it related to blues dance. The class has received much praise from the blues dance community. From the anonymous feedback surveys, one dancer said that “it’s tough to provide an environment that allows for asking all the questions we non-colored folk think about but are afraid to ask. I learned a lot, and it gave me a greater understanding of the black experience and how it relates to the blues.” Another dancer said that “the discussion was very respectful, well-moderated, and a good source for learning.” Delk stated, “I am grateful that this event has the guts to let us come up with classes that are on uncomfortable topics, in addition to the ones that give us warm fuzzies” (Jen Delk, personal communication, April 22, 2016).

Organizer Sara Cherny has had held classes in Chicago focusing on clapping games and jump rope to expand dancers understanding of the rhythm inherent in African-American culture. She stated that the idea for the class came straight from reading “The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop” by Kyra D. Gaunt. Attendees were expected to “examine the [relevance of these] games in African American culture and history from West African dance to St. Louis rap” (Sara Cherny, personal communication, April 22, 2016). This class focuses on teaching an appreciation for the African-American roots of blues music and dance, as opposed to cultural appropriation. The difference between appropriation and appreciation are defined by Damon Stone (2015) in his article “Appropriation versus Appreciation” as follows: “Appreciation is becoming one with a thing and finding your own

voice to express yourself from within it. Appropriation is when you take the “words” and change them or their meaning to fit what you want to say. One is letting the thing change you and the other is changing the thing to suit you.”

Denver organizer and instructor Aimee Eddins said that she and, at her encouragement, other leaders in her scene have attended classes taught by African-Americans on the history of African-American music and dance. She has taught classes on the evolution of blues as well as a series that focused on individual blues artists and their stories (Aimee Eddins, personal communication, April 24, 2016).

Ruth Bruhn (personal communication, April 23, 2016) teaches lessons for the blues dance scene in Fort Collins that include a month of lessons on African dance, African American history through dance, and how blues became the dance it is today.

Other instructors like Jenny Sowden, New York, NY and Catherine Palmier, Puerto Rico have taught West African dance classes and described how they translate into blues dance. One blues dance instructor has gone so far as to focus on blues and the black image in literature in her MA in English, which provides the background she needs to instruct her local scene in the history of blues music in Provo, UT (Chelsea June Adams, personal communication, April 22, 2016).

Heidi Fite, a blues dance instructor from San Francisco, CA, spoke on the blues dance community and its roots in African-American culture. She believes that the blues dance community has made and continues to make an effort to link itself to African-American culture. Fite cites she and her partner’s extensive historical explanations of the dances they were teaching. Fite interviewed Palladium-era dancer Dawn Hampton to ask her opinion on European-American people teaching an African-American dance. Fite summarized by saying that it has

been an expectation that you cannot dance blues if you don't also endeavor to understand the history from which it comes (personal communication, April 23, 2016).

Integrating African-American History in Modern Blues Dance Performance

Through choreographed pieces, some dancers have demonstrated an understanding of epic memory, which is a concept in African dance that relates to the memories that are invoked during dance, in which emotions, experiences, ethos and pathos are re-experienced by both the performer and the audience (Welsh-Asante, 1985). For example, Denver blues dancer Katrina Rogers recently (bluesSHOUT!, Chicago, April 2016) performed a dance to a work song called "Go Down Hannah" which was choreographed by Joseph DeMers. Rogers described her character as an African woman being pulled away from Africa, the hope she experienced, and the reality of waking up every day still in slavery, still in oppression. She goes on to explain that DeMers provided her with the choreography and the quality of movement, but Rogers chose to shape it into a storyline with a strong theme of oppression and hope. This is clear in Rogers' response to the question, "What do you want people to take away from your performance?":

While this piece was a performance of one person's time in slavery, the importance of the piece was to show that there is still oppression in blues. It came out of slavery.

Oppression didn't just happen during that timeframe. It's still present now, especially in black culture. There are still people feeling the same sentiment of oppression that was present during the time of slavery. They still feel limited. Please don't forget why you're here. People can connect to blues in multiple ways, and they can have similar experiences to the culture they're immersing themselves in. Don't just learn how to move to this music, but think about how you embody it. There's something greater than yourself that has shaped this music and movement. (Katrina Rogers, personal communication, April

26, 2016)

Rogers illustrates exactly why integrating African dance aesthetics, such as epic memory, in blues dance choreography and performance is so important. African-Americans still experience racism and oppression, and without a nod to that present day reality, the roots of African-American social dance are lost.

In 2014, Jenny Sowden performed a dance she choreographed to Nina Simone's "Be My Husband" in which she shuffled her feet, clapped her hands, and displayed athleticism to tell a woman's story. Stephen York writes a blog called Sweet Choreography, in which Sowden stated in an interview that she was inspired by the Ring Shout, African dance, blues dance, and jazz dance, but she also included modern dance and pedestrian movement. According to Sowden (2014), the story she wanted to express with this choreography was one about the assumptions we make about people, and the complexity of the hidden topics within ourselves. We can have many conflicting emotions all at the same time. While Sowden did not state that her choreography was intended this way, it echoes the present day African-American experience in that inaccurate, hurtful assumptions are frequently made by European-Americans about African-American situations, actions, and choices.

Walk into any dance hall and you can see modern lindy hop and blues dancers playing with call and response with either the live band or their dance partners. There is percussive footwork and use of clapping in both social dance and choreography. In every novice blues dance lesson, most blues dance instructors talk about the importance of bent knees with the body tilted forward from this hips. Improvisation, a concept at the root of every African-American social dance (Jackson, 2001, p. 40), is present and prized on the social dance floor and in competitions. Dance moves are being combined in order to create new movement. However,

duality in performances is no longer important, as duality was a concept employed by African-American dancers performing for European-Americans; most modern blues dance audiences are predominantly European-Americans. Simply because of the technical skill required for polyrhythmic movement, many dancers instead add subdivided rhythms. Though the literature is nearly non-existent for blues dance, research has shown that the European-American commodification of lindy hop and mambo/salsa has resulted in a departure from the once rich learning environment that is cultural immersion, which has clearly had an effect on the music, the structure of the dance, and how dancers view each other. Dances once learned at home and in racially/culturally homogenous groups to live music are now being learned in dance halls and ballrooms to DJed music by a much more heterogeneous group of people.

Modern African-American Dance and LPP

African-Americans learned and still learn dance through social/community ties, which is the very definition of situated learning. While some might argue that these dances would not have survived without this commodification, African-Americans have a long history of privatized oral tradition (Papa, Gerber, & Mohamed, 2008). These dances might not have been present in popular European-American culture, but they would have survived more casually in the kitchens of African-American grandmothers and at community gatherings, such as family weddings, much in the same way storytelling was passed down from generation to generation (Robinson, 2015; Rury, 2012). Cultural immersion, or LPP, is still how the African-American community shares a lot of its art, and dancing is learned the same way (Stone, 2015).

Fad dances. In the Christian underpinnings of European-American culture, articulation of different parts of the torso is seen as sexual. In African-American dance, using the torso is an aesthetic value based on whole-body dancing. Elders train African-American children to learn

the latest fad dances, such as *the cupid shuffle*, *the dougie*, *the whip*, *the nae nae*, *the wobble*, and *the stanky leg*, not to encourage promiscuity, but to encourage a cultural legacy of polycentric, polyrhythmic African dance aesthetic. These dances are still passed on by the elders in African-American community, which exemplifies LPP. Take African-American social dance, such as lindy hop, into ballrooms, and the dances have been diluted for European-American audience and participant consumption. Furthermore, it has been incredibly rare for African-American dancers and choreographers to receive proper credit for their creativity and talent (Gottschild, 2003; Hancock, 2013). These fad dances have not been taught in ballrooms, but *twerking* and *the harlem shake* have still been culturally misappropriated in social media and by celebrities. This level of disrespect divorces the art from its history and meaning. It is no surprise that the dance itself would be taught differently if it is divested from the culture from which it was born.

Chicago steppin’. Steppin’ is a modern African-American social dance that has similarities with lindy hop. It has rock steps and triple steps, and there is a focus on musicality. In contrast to lindy hop, which is danced to syncopated swing music, steppin’ is a much smoother dance, as there is no pulse, and it is typically danced to R&B. Unlike the modern lindy hop scene, it is an exclusively African-American dance community. European-Americans think that lindy hop died and was not revived until the late 1990s, but it actually never left the African-American community; it just developed into steppin’. Cities outside Chicago call it *hand dancing*, *the hustle*, and *boopin’*, but Chicago dancers lay claim to the development of the dance. Most African-American culture that is appropriated by mainstream European-American society tends to stem from extreme examples (e.g. “gangsta rap”). As steppin’ sits squarely between grit and polish, it has flown under the radar of appropriation. It is learned, like all other cultural forms of dance, through social interactions. Though the dance is learned through cultural

immersion, it is also learned from structured workshops and classes held within the African-American community. This commodification is the first kind in modern African-American social dance to belong solely to African-Americans. Chicago Steppin' is a perfect example of what occurs when a culturally learned dance is commodified, but not appropriated (Hancock, 2013).

Conclusions and Future Study

The codification, professionalization, and appropriation of African-American vernacular dance has had a number of effects. African-American social dance is still taught at home by elder relatives. Concepts have been passed down by demonstration and participation, in the style of situated learning. Dances have been passed on through relatives. This is how dance in African-American culture has survived. Modern lindy hop and blues dancers who were not raised in African-American culture are missing key elements of African-American history and, thus, a more comprehensive understanding of African-American social dances. In the pressure to sell instruction of these dances, the simplicity that allows for improvisation and a physical dialogue between dance partners, a defining social aspect of these dances, has been lost. Through codification, we have lost uniqueness and creativity. We have lost the the very nature of what were once conversational dances. While the modern lindy hop and salsa dance scenes have been focusing on vintage recreationism for the sake of "authenticity," the modern blues dance scene has and continues to make a valiant effort to understand and share the African and African-American roots of blues dance. Further research (specifically interviews with African-Americans who have learned blues dance from their families and communities) on the effects of the commodification and professionalization of the modern blues dance scene would help to explain what African-American cultural elements of the dance have been lost. The literature supports

that the loss of situated learning, or cultural immersion, often leads to cultural erasure. At this point, the effects of this cultural erasure remain unclear.

References

- Basie, C. & Murray, A. (1985). *Good Morning Blues: The Autobiography of Count Basie*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Defrantz, T. F. (2004). *The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power*, pp. 2-60.
- DeMers, J. D. (2012). Frame matching: a framework for teaching Swing and Blues partner dancing. *Research in Dance Education*, 14, 71-80.
- Gottschild, B. D. (2003). *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography of Coon to Cool*. New York, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hancock, B.H. (2013). *American Allegory: Lindy Hop and the Racial Imagination*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hazzard-Gordon, K. (1990). *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Hinton, R. (1988). Black Dance in American History in G. Myers (Ed.), *The Black Tradition in American Modern Dance* (pp. 4-7). Durham, NC: American Dance Festival Program.
- Jackson, J. D. (2001). Improvisation in African-American vernacular dancing. *Dance Research Journal*, 33, 2, pp. 40-53.
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McMains, J. & Robinson, D. (2002). Swingin' Out: Southern California's Lindy Revival. In M. Needham (Ed.), *I see America dancing: selected readings, 1685-2000* (pp. 84-91). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- McMains, J. (2015). *Spinning Mambo Into Salsa: Caribbean Dance in Global Commerce*. New

- York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, A. (2010). Cross-Cultural Perspectives on the Creation of American Dance: 1619-1950. Retrieved from https://www.hofstra.edu/pdf/academics/colleges/HCLAS/GEOG/geog_honors_mooreA10.pdf
- Monaghan, T. (2002). Stompin' At the Savoy - Remembering, Researching, and Re-enacting the Lindy Hop's relationship to Harlem's Savoy Ballroom, pp. 31-83.
- Papa, M., Gerber, A., & Mohamed, A. (2008, May 27). African American Culture through Oral Tradition. Retrieved from <http://www.gwu.edu/~e73afram/ag-am-mp.html>
- Pilgrim, D. (2016, February 2). Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia: The Coon Caricature. Retrieved from <http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/coon/>
- Roberts, J. (2012). Beyond Learning By Doing: Theoretical Currents in Experiential Education. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Robinson, D. (2015). Modern Moves: Dancing Race During the Ragtime and Jazz Eras. New York, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rury, J. L. (2016). Education and Social Change: Contours in the History of American Schooling. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Stone, Damon. (2015, June 9). Appropriation versus Appreciation. Retrieved from <http://davons.tone.dance/articles/appreciation-versus-appropriation/>
- Welsh-Asante, K. (2000). Zimbabwe Dance. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc.
- Welsh-Asante, K. (1985). Commonalities in African Dance: An Aesthetic Foundation in K. Welsh-Asante & M. K. Asante (Eds.), African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity (pp. 71-82). Westwood, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Young, J. O. (2010). Cultural Appropriation and the Arts. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.

York, S. (2014, August 9). Art: You Know It When You See It. Retrieved from <https://sweetchoreographyblog.wordpress.com/2014/08/29/art-you-know-it-when-you-see-it/>

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee for their patience, support, and encouragement throughout the process of writing this thesis.

I would also like to thank everyone in the national blues dance scene who gave me their time in the form of interviews and editing, including especially Heidi Fite, Katrina Rogers, Joseph DeMers, Joey Shelley, and Jen Delk.

Lastly, I would like to thank Juliet McMains, who met with me to discuss the direction and importance of my thesis. With her support and resources, I was able to more confidently address the commodification and appropriation in African-American social dances.