Chapter Title: Embodying Rhythm: Improvisation as Agency in African Dance
Chapter Author(s): Abby Carlozzo

Book Title: Hot Feet and Social Change
Book Subtitle: African Dance and Diaspora Communities
Book Editor(s): KARIAMU WELSH, ESAILAMA G. A. DIOUF and YVONNE DANIEL
Published by: University of Illinois Press
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/j.ctvswx837.17

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

University of Illinois Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Hot Feet and Social Change*

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

PART III

Perpetual Motion in the Aesthetics of Africa

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Embodying Rhythm

Improvisation as Agency in African Dance

Abby Carlozzo

Introduction

In 2014 I conducted research in Burkina Faso, West Africa, collaborating with a Burkinabe dancer to uncover how our sociocultural backgrounds influence our approaches to dance. My collaborator was Awa Nikiema, a tall, slender Mossi[1] woman in her late twenties, who welcomed me into her apartment for the duration of my eight-week stay. According to Awa, as a child she would wander into dance classes in her neighborhood and was allowed to stay because of her charm and curiosity. Although her family questioned her choice to pursue dance as a career, she continues to choreograph, teach, and perform in music videos and live television productions.

I had a similar attachment to dance, having started with ballet lessons as a child and, in college, discovering modern concert and African and Diaspora forms, like West African and *hip-hop* dancing. Later, I dedicated myself to dance research and to fathoming the relationships between Africanist and other performance values within a university research grant. As a young adult, I had encouraging support from my family to study dance and enter university teaching of dance, as well as to journey to Burkina Faso.

In addition to living with and experiencing everyday life alongside my Burkinabe colleague, I took dance classes with her and began an interchange of cultural ideas surrounding dance performance and practices. Together, we taught one another on a daily basis. She wanted to teach me various tra-

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

ditional dances from the ethnic repertoires she knew; in return, she wanted me to teach her about ideas and practices within ballet and modern dance. Although we ventured out to several villages at times, we spent the majority of our time in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, a bustling and vibrant metropolis full of life and art.

Initially, I intended to utilize improvisation as a common ground from which we could reflect, discuss, exchange movement, and learn about our individual tendencies and preferences. I was working with the assumption that improvisation is "of the moment" and needs no more than a willing and able body and mind, a notion that is itself a result of my own cultural biases. In assuming these premises, however, I hoped to use dance improvisation as a tool to reckon with our past and present bodies and tease out how the history within us affected our current approach to movement. While I was eager to reflect and analyze, my collaborator was not as interested in such methodologies. For her, improvisation was so interwoven into her creative process that one could not be extracted from the other; it seemed to be inherent in the movement itself.

We quickly discovered the immense differences in our approaches to improvisation. While mine stems from a postmodern aesthetic in the United States, hers derived from the rhythmic play and "innovation within form" that define the neotraditional West African dances in which she trained.[2] Improvisation arose out of her deep respect and knowledge of dance/music traditions and her understanding that such traditions cannot live without innovation. Although I utilize the term "tradition," I acknowledge its ever-evolving nature with respect to changing contexts and lifestyles.[3] On the other hand, in a European or North American dance context, dance improvisation is often a separate practice, a personal exploration used to gain bodily awareness.[4] With such apparent differences, it became necessary to negotiate carefully and communicate delicately to find a shared place from which to work.

Despite my preliminary research efforts, I had not considered the fact that I was working within a very specific and limited framework of movement improvisation, albeit one that has roots in African aesthetics. As I obsessed over tracing my dancing history using improvisation as a research tool (and expected her to do the same—a mistake on my part that I have learned from), I neglected to consider where each of our experiences of improvisation fell on the historical continuum. And although I briefed her on the goals of my research and she briefed me on the goals of her research, at that time I had not taken into account what tracing her dance history meant to her, if anything—yet another young researcher's mistake from which I have since learned. Once I realized my biases and the assumptions I had made prior

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

to working with Awa, I was able to go with the flow of learning new conceptions of improvisation and potentially of exploring what these mean in the context of the African Diaspora. We spent time in the studio, attended different classes, danced at night clubs, went to many performances, and rehearsed for music videos (I even got to be on set for the filming of several). Through all of our experiences together, I was able to learn more about the inner workings of dance improvisation in these contexts.

The research conducted in 2014 exposed my limited view of dance improvisation. In sharing my experiences in Burkina Faso here, I first present the launching point from which the desire to expand my considerations of improvisation arose. After acknowledging my own cultural biases, I trace the African influences on improvisation in the United States and expand upon the aesthetic and philosophical similarities and differences of improvisation within African dance forms. With this chapter, I define the philosophical and aesthetic characteristics of Africanist approaches to improvisation compared with those of the postmodern dance aesthetic. I work to problematize the existing binaries between these contexts. In a globalized world, cultures do not exist in isolation from one another; information circulates across nations and borders and is transformed in the process.[5] I also work to challenge my initial biases as a dancer who has trained, performed, and created within the postmodern idiom.

Due to the paucity of literature surrounding the uses of improvisation in African dance contexts, I present an intertextual approach to uncovering improvisation as an Africanist aesthetic. I comb through scholarship written on the use of improvisation in African diasporic contexts, such as *jazz dance*, *tap*, and *hip-hop* dances, in order to unearth the intersecting histories of an "Africanist" approach to improvisation. Using this methodology as a launching point, I hope to carve a space for further research on improvisation in African dance forms. I also establish the scope of this research: to focus on Africanist and postmodern improvisational contexts in the African Diaspora. In doing so, I recognize that this excludes a vast range of cultures and dance forms that utilize improvisation for a variety of purposes.

Additionally, throughout this chapter, I acknowledge my own positionality as a white U.S. American woman. As such, I carry with me a set of privileges and biases that I attempt to challenge as I engage with and research Africanist understandings. Moreover, although I make references to "African" music and dance and "Africanist" approaches to improvisation over the course of this exploration, I do not essentialize the diversity of traditions and perspectives that exist inside these blanket terms. I reference dance historian and critic Brenda Dixon Gottschild to clarify that "the term 'Africanist' refers to

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

concepts, practices, attitudes, or forms that have roots/origins in Africa and the African diaspora"[6] while acknowledging the diverse range of practices that this term encompasses.[7]

With that in mind, I seek to illuminate the "invisibilized"[8] Africanist approaches to improvisation that specifically exist in the United States, one of the largest centers of the African Diaspora and the site of tremendous influence from continental West African dance. While Africanist approaches are prevalent in both traditional and vernacular dance forms, such modes of improvising are often absent from considerations of improvisation as a choreographic tool and otherwise. Thereby, I posit several aesthetic and philosophical characteristics of improvisation in African dance contexts, a specific set of concerns that include a deep connectivity to rhythm, improvisation as performance, communication between audience and performers, a mutual knowledge and understanding of tradition among participants, and individual agency within tradition. Ultimately, I argue that it is this individual agency that allows for innovation and transformation of dance/music traditions.

Defining the Africanist Aesthetic

Before I focus on the role of improvisation in African dance contexts, it is crucial to acknowledge the body of existing scholarship surrounding the physical and philosophical aesthetics of African dance forms. Several scholars and dance specialists have laid a groundwork for formally defining characteristics common to dances of Africa and the African Diaspora, including Dolores K. Cayou, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Katrina Hazzard-Donaldson (formerly Hazzard-Gordon), Jaqui Malone, Marshall and Jean Stearns, Robert Farris Thompson, and Kariamu Welsh (formerly Welsh Asante).

In *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act*, art historian Robert Farris Thompson presents ten defining canons of African art forms. Although Thompson has been critiqued for attempting to universalize an entire continent, his work has laid the foundation from which other scholars have built substantive dance understandings. He points to:

> (1) ephebism: the stronger power that comes from youth; (2) "Afrikanische Aufheben": simultaneous suspending and preserving of the beat; (3) the "get-down quality": descending direction in melody, sculpture, dance; (4) multiple meter: dancing many drums; (5) looking smart: playing the patterns with nature and with line; (6) correct entrance and exit: "killing the song," "cutting the dance," "lining the face"; (7) vividness cast into equilibrium: personal and representational balance; (8) call-and-response: the politics of perfection; (9) ancestorism: the ability to incarnate destiny; (10) coolness: truth and generosity regained.[9]

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Notably, although Thompson does not explicitly mention improvisation as a definitive characteristic, he alludes to the improvisational nature of African dance in his discussion of several canons. Thompson speaks to the addition of "personal style" and "demonstration of virtuosity" as markers of a good dancer.[10] He indicates that a skilled dancer knows precisely when to enter and exit the dance ring or cipher, in relation to the drums; the dancer may improvise but always "strikes the last gesture of his dance timed to the last syllable of the master drummer's phrase."[11] A connectivity to rhythm is evident here, as is a mutual understanding of tradition between dancer and drummer. It becomes clear that a knowledge of traditional drum rhythms is necessary in order to begin to play within the dance form.

Additionally, Thompson posits the notion of "an aesthetic of the cool" that permeates African and African American social contexts.[12] As he explains, coolness is an attitude that reflects the moral underpinnings of many African societies, and its significance varies from culture to culture. Among many things, the term "cool" represents an all-embracing sense of composure and self-control that permeates various aspects of society.[13] It is used to describe the act of maintaining a sense of calmness and ease in moments of both stress and pleasure. Specifically, dancers and musicians may wear a mask-like, detached face even as they exert themselves physically.[14] Although Thompson only briefly mentions dance in his work, he acknowledges the interconnectivity of art and life that exists in many African cultures. I argue that these blurred boundaries between life and art contribute to the shared knowledge of tradition among dancing participants, which also helps explain, in part, why an outsider might miss the inner workings of improvisation at a dance event in these contexts.

While Thompson contributes a set of defining characteristics with which we can speak about African art forms, dance scholars such as Welsh and Gottschild provide a closer look at the physical and philosophical underpinnings of African dance. I stand upon the shoulders of these two scholars in particular when I assert that discussions of the role of improvisation in African dance are often missing from scholarly texts.

Choreographer and scholar Kariamu Welsh takes a decidedly dance perspective in examining African arts and posits a thorough listing of characteristics of African dance. In her original essay, "Commonalities in African Dance: An Aesthetic Foundation" (1985), she acknowledges the fact that cultural anthropologists and ethnomusicologists generally "lack the perspective of a trained dancer, choreographer, or dance historian to properly analyze the movements and steps found in [African] dance."[15] Welsh highlights a shortcoming in much of the then-existing literature on African dance: at-

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

tention to the intricacies of movement. I build on this critique to argue that these shortcomings have occurred, in part, because continental Africans' understandings of improvisation are either unknown or not fully discussed by U.S. American and European dance researchers.

Welsh's work on the oral tradition in African art has also significantly contributed to my assertion of improvisation as agency in African dance contexts concerning matters of ownership. She explains the oral principle that comprises African art, then outlines seven senses that act as a framework through which to view the diverse span of African dances: polyrhythm, polycentrism, curvilinear, dimensional, epic memory, repetition, and holism. According to Welsh, the oral tradition is both an art and a form of documentation. Further, she alludes to the issue of ownership and the fluidity of ownership in African oral traditions:

> The "oral" becomes the property of the speaker to reshape or to retell within a shape. The boundaries are there in plot, structure, outline, and form, but it is the dancer who breathes new life into the dance and it becomes hers/his for the moment. There are no permanent stamps of the creators, only the changing designs, rhythms, movements that change with the performers.[16]

A dancer always performs in relationship with the musicians, audience, and other dancers, thus blurring the lines of ownership. The "oral" is constantly passed around, moving fluidly between the individuals who contribute to the performance. Moreover, Welsh alludes to the agency a performer has over cultural information that is perpetually passed from body to body in a dance event. Welsh's discussion of the fluid nature of ownership within oral traditions supports my assertion that dance improvisation in African contexts not only perpetuates dance traditions but also grants individual artists the agency to contribute to the evolution of dance traditions.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild is another dance scholar whose work greatly contributes to my own, specifically concerning the illumination of Africanist influences on the postmodern aesthetics that define much of my experience with improvisation. Gottschild expands upon Thompson's work, focusing on Africanist aesthetics as they relate to practices of dance. In her seminal work, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (1996), she contributes significantly to the uncovering of Africanist influences on U.S. American culture that have been invisibilized by dominant European perceptions. She illuminates the racialized history of dance in the United States that privileges Eurocentric thinking. In addition to exposing a history of cultural appropriation and "invisibilization," her text outlines five premises of an Africanist aesthetic, which include embracing the con-

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

flict, polycentrism and polyrhythm, high-affect juxtaposition, and, drawing from Thompson, ephebism and especially "the aesthetic of the cool."[17] Once again, there is no direct mention of improvisation; however, improvisation contributes to and is implied by many of Gottschild's premises.

Furthermore, Gottschild acknowledges that Africanist aesthetics pervade dance forms in the United States, though they are not always credited as such. The "invisibilized" Africanist presence in the United States is due in part to the "whitenizing" of black cultures to please European American ideals.[18] Thus, when white America borrowed African-derived traditions, they transformed certain facets of black culture that disagreed with their own, while other aspects remained. This may have been, in part, why I was not originally aware of the shared roots of my friend, Awa, and my approaches to dance improvisation. According to Gottschild, white Americans have adopted everything from African American culture—from hairstyles to physical and verbal mannerisms. They have been drawn to that which was perceived as "exotic" or "sexual" in nature, indicating a reflection of white privilege and cultural biases. The urge to improvise is another example of a borrowed aesthetic that persisted.[19]

Anthropologist Jane C. Desmond also speaks of the changes that occur with the transmission of ideas between cultures. She describes how the dominant culture "refined," "polished," and "often desexualized" the dances of nondominant cultures, which can be seen in the way they "toned down," "tamed," and "whitened" such popular social dances as the *turkey trot* and the *charleston*.[20] Additionally, performance theorist Thomas F. DeFrantz reinforces these concepts in his essay "The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip-Hop Dance and Body Power." DeFrantz speaks of the dangers that occur when nonparticipating, immobile white audiences attempt to reproduce and commodify black social dances.[21] Although DeFrantz raises more questions than he provides answers, his essay serves as a catalyst for important discussions about cultural appropriation. I mention these scholars to clarify that the issue of dominant cultures borrowing without crediting the source is not a new phenomenon; the concept of improvisation in dance is no exception.

The Africanist Aesthetic in Dances of the Diaspora

Various scholars in the fields of musicology and dance studies have written specifically about dances of the African Diaspora in the United States. They have helped illuminate a deep connectivity to rhythm and performative aspects of improvisation in African and Diaspora dance contexts. Musicologists

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Marshall and Jean Stearns were two of the first to write at length about the African origins of African American vernacular dance (1968).[22] Focusing on *jazz dance*, the Stearnses revealed a co-mingling of both European and African influences; however, it is the African influence that gives *jazz dance*, in general, its "rhythmic propulsion" and "swing."[23] Moreover, much can be gained from comparing the Stearnses' six characteristics of African dance to those that Thompson, Welsh, and Gottschild offered later. The Stearnses identify: (1) bare feet and the accompanying flat-footed gliding, dragging, or shuffling; (2) bent knees and body bent at the waist; (3) animalistic imitations; (4) importance of improvisation; (5) centrifugal pelvic region; and (6) propulsive rhythm and swing as characteristic elements.[24] Most notable is the problematic essentializing and superficiality of the Stearnses' list, which is arguably more superficial and essentializing than those of scholars such as Thompson and Welsh, who dig deeper into the inner workings and philosophies of many African dances. However, despite their limitations, the Stearnses reinforce an important concept that I explore in this research: the integration of improvisation and rhythm in African dance. My research and fieldwork experiences show that rhythmic play is inextricable from improvisation in African and Diaspora dance contexts, but not without the deep understanding of rhythmic tradition can an artist begin to play within the form.

For instance, my friend Awa's body possessed a sensitivity to rhythm that enabled her to negotiate within a particular dance form. I noted during a *warba*[25] lesson how my collaborator exhibited a sense of freedom confined by the limitations of tradition and style. As she added footwork and arm gestures to the isolated hip movement of the *warba*, she would explicitly declare that she was experimenting with the arms and feet or that she was performing a traditional variation. During my time there, on the other hand, I was only beginning to grasp the *warba*'s perpetual hip twist; neither my mind nor body could fathom embellishing the basic step, illustrated by the discomfort and frustration I experienced within *warba* form. Attempting to isolate my pelvic girdle, I would feel a deep burning in my core; yet despite my efforts, the movement would reverberate up through my torso, refusing to be contained. As I "played," the rhythm pushed through my body.

Dance artist and revered teacher Dolores K. Cayou has written about the historical development of modern *jazz dance*, focusing on its origins in African dance forms.[26] In her discussion of characteristics that define African dance, Cayou presented several important qualities: "Individualism of style within the group style" and "functionalism—becoming what you dance—the art of real life."[27] First, it is important to note that while there are individuation and virtuosic moments in African dance, these are often in the

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

context of the individual's relationship to the group, musicians, and others, including the audience. Referring back to Welsh's discussion of the fluidity of ownership, an individual has room to play, but only within the structures of tradition. Second, because art is often such an integral part of African and Diaspora life, the entire community becomes enmeshed in the performance, blurring the boundaries between audience and performer.[28] Here, I begin to formulate that communication between audience and performers, as well as a mutual understanding of dance traditions among participants, are key philosophical underpinnings of dance/music improvisation in African and Diaspora contexts.

Sociologist and dance practitioner Katrina Hazzard-Donald has also written about the history of dance in the African Diaspora, focusing on secular social dances.[29] Both Cayou and Hazzard-Donald briefly discuss the role of enslavement in bringing African influences to the United States, and they both speak of the integral role of music and movement in everyday life. However, Hazzard-Donald argues that the strongest link to African dances can be found in African American social dances. Within social dances—such as the *jook*—lies a sense of community and of personal identity within the group. Hazzard-Donald also mentions a shortcoming of much of the literature on African American culture: the central role of dance in life is largely ignored.[30] I return once again to my argument that these shortcomings may be a result of North American and European scholars who lack the cultural understanding of those practicing dance in African and Diaspora contexts.

Dance historian Jacqui Malone also contributes to the understanding of the sociocultural history and African roots of African American vernacular dance.[31] Echoing the work of previous scholars in her book, *Steppin' on the Blues*, Malone explores the interconnectivity of music, song, and dance in African American culture. She reaffirms that dances of Africa and the African Diaspora render visible the rhythms of the music; one does not exist without the other. She emphasizes the sign of a good dancer, which is the ability to converse with the music and to utilize various parts of the body to create visualizations of rhythm.[32] Malone describes the qualities of polyrhythmicity and polycentricity.[33] Additionally, she reasserts the idea that art is an integral part of life in African cultures, and that dance events are communal, involving the audience as participants alongside the dancers and musicians.[34] Implied here is a mutual understanding of the inner workings of a given dance event such that an outsider might be unaware of particular characteristics, like improvised rhythmic responses to music.

Finally, as DeFrantz reminds us, "these categories of Africanist tendencies are broad enough to accommodate several generations of music and move-

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

ment styles."[35] Indeed, Africa's music and dance styles are as diverse as the continent itself.[36] Additionally, the nature of tradition is ever evolving in and of itself. Thus, while the specific nuances across genres and differences across cultures cannot be ignored, my compiled set of characteristics serve as an all-encompassing platform from which more specific and in-depth discussions can take place. In the process of recalling scholars and their findings in the field of dance studies and beyond, I have established a framework through which to speak more specifically about the aesthetics of African dance. While Welsh and Gottschild in particular have led to my desire to uncover philosophical and aesthetic characteristics of improvisation that are often missing from writings on dance, others, such as Cayou, Malone, and DeFrantz, have reiterated the importance of considering what a given dance event means to its practitioners.

Improvisation as an Africanist Aesthetic

It is important to note the skill and knowledge that are required in order to improvise. As defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, improvisation is "the action or fact of composing or performing music, poetry, drama, etc., spontaneously, or without preparation."[37] The word *improvisation* has been used to describe music, poetry, and theater, generally in European and North American contexts. Both the definition and origin of the word reveal its inherent limitations, which involve a focus on extemporaneous actions in European and Euro-American art forms. Indeed, the use of the term "improvisation" is largely a "Western" phenomenon; thus, I argue here that the phrase "stylistic innovation within form" is better suited to represent the act of "spontaneous" creation that occurs in the context of this discussion.[38] Even then, to consider improvisation as "spontaneous" creation raises a number of concerns. As performance studies theorist Danielle Goldman elaborates, "spontaneous acts" disregards the skill set that is necessary to perform such acts, relegating the innovation that exists within traditional forms to thoughtless acts. In her introduction to *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, she writes:

> A more serious problem with many discussions of improvisation is that their emphasis on spontaneity and intuition often implies a lack of preparation, thereby eliding the historical knowledge, sense of tradition, and the enormous skill that the most eloquent improvisers are able to mobilize.[39]

Many scholars utilize the term "spontaneous" to describe the of-the-moment composition of embellishments[40] that take place in African dance and the

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

music on which it relies. Temporally, the word works to highlight the moment-to-moment decision-making ability of the performer; however, one cannot ignore the skill set behind each decision. The agency individuals have to spontaneously add their own stylistic nuances is fueled by a deep-seated knowledge and mastery of dance traditions and the steps, rhythms, and connotations that these traditions entail. Thus, I distinguish between "spontaneous" and "spontaneity," two terms that tend to be central to conversations surrounding improvisation. To describe improvised movement as *spontaneous* connotes a sense of unpremeditated, untrained, or "natural" behavior, which disregards a dancer's training and skill sets. However, to speak of an improvised dancer's *spontaneity* is to recognize the dancer's mastery of impulse and moment-to-moment decision making. Though there is only a subtle difference between the two terms, the latter term clarifies what many scholars and artists, including myself, actually mean when they use the former.

One of my best memories and best lessons in *azonto*, a popular dance from Ghana that relies greatly on improvisation, was on the side of the road in the village of Arbolé. Waiting with several friends in the hot sun for a bus back to the city, we began dancing to pass time, which progressed into an *azonto* dance party. (Awa always had a portable speaker prepared for dance classes, rehearsals, and random acts of dancing.) I realized through this roadside event that this was not simply a "spontaneous" cultural exchange; the underlying knowledge of the movements and rhythms of the *azonto* were required before we could "spontaneously" add our own individual flair. Thus, I became more sensitive to the import of this characteristic in African dance improvisation.

African and European Forms of Improvisation

While notable research exists concerning the role of improvisation in various African-derived art forms such as jazz music and hip-hop creations,[41] scholarship focusing solely on improvisation in African dance is sparse, often buried within writing on African music and African American vernacular forms.[42] Despite such limitations, I have formulated a set of characteristics that define the philosophy and aesthetics of improvisation in African-derived movement forms. Such characteristics include: a deep connectivity to rhythm; improvisation as performance; communication and participation between audience and performers; a mutual knowledge and understanding of dance/music traditions among participants; and agency of the individual within dance/music traditions.[43]

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

African artist and scholar Alphonse Tiérou speaks briefly of improvisation in his book *Dooplé: The Eternal Law of African Dance*. He argues that because African dances rely on the repetition of fundamental movements, dancers are free to improvise within the structures of dance/music traditions. As dancers develop the skills and knowledge necessary for improvisation, their sense of rhythm, coordination, and perception of space and style become evident. Additionally, Tiérou discusses collective improvisation as a highly refined skill. Not only must each dancer possess a knowledge of rhythm and mastery of the dance, but they must also be able to listen to one another and the music (including song improvisation and drum or other instrument cues) with acuity, taking into account the dance actions of their partners. Tiérou alludes to the fact that both participants and spectators require a standard of knowledge in order to fully appreciate the improvisation that is embedded into traditional African dances.[44] Thus, the agency of the individual requires a shared knowledge and understanding of tradition among participants, including dancer, musician, and audience members who, I argue, cannot fully appreciate the inner workings of a dance event without a basic level of underlying knowledge.

In *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* anthropologist Margaret Thompson Drewal argues that ritual involves a dialogue between past traditions and present practitioners, and she posits that "ritual practitioners as knowledgeable human agents transform ritual itself through play and improvisation."[45] Drewal clarifies that in Yoruba cultures, the words "ritual" and "play" are used interchangeably, emphasizing that they are not discrete categories but interconnected, inclusive concepts. She notes first that "play," in this sense, does not represent frivolous, idle leisure as it does to most average Canadian, U.S. American, or European capitalists; instead, it acknowledges the skilled effort of trained artists whose knowledge contributes to the transformative nature of ritual. Thus, improvisation as "play" does not denote an absentminded, off-the-cuff creation but refers to a performer's thoughtful modification of tradition. Improvisation is implicit in tradition: performers do not break free from the rituals of their ancestors but contribute to the continuation of the spirit of improvisation.[46] In this sense, improvisational agency within the dance/music tradition serves as a respectful honoring of the past, even as the dance or music artist contributes individual style in the present.

Moreover, improvisational play takes on diverse forms. Among many things, performers may reinterpret, recontextualize, intervene, or interrupt in a ritual event, not frivolously but with intention as an homage to tradition. According to Drewal, ritual is not rigid, it is continuously under revision;

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

that is, the past is not static but constantly evolving, a notion posited by other scholars, such as Welsh, who have contributed to my analyses. Through improvisation, performers are able to transform ritual structures while adhering to the practices of their ancestors. In her discussion, Drewal highlights the agency of performers and their role in perpetuating ever-evolving traditions. Additionally, Drewal emphasizes that Yoruba performance is participatory:

> The relationships between spectators and spectacle are unstable, one always collapsing into the other. Participatory spectacle does not set up fixed unequal power relationships between the gazer and the object of the gaze; rather, the participatory nature of Yoruba spectacle itself means that the subject and object positions are continually in flux during performance.[47]

Digging a bit further into the concept of performance and spectacle (and examining another Eurocentric perspective), I outline anthropologist and cultural performance theorist John MacAloon's four criteria for spectacle:[48] visual sensory and symbolic codes are primary; the event is grand and monumental; spectacle engenders excitement in the audience through its heightened dynamism; and it institutionalizes separate roles between audience and performer, thereby establishing a distance between them.[49] Drewal recognizes that Yoruba improvisatory performances meet these criteria save for the separate roles between audience and performer.[50] Unlike Eurocentric viewing conventions that position the audience as distanced observers,[51] there is no division between spectator and spectacle in Yoruba performance; both viewers and performers possess a knowledge of the improvisation at play in performance—which contributes to the notion that those who do not possess the key cultural information are unaware of the improvisation taking place. I argue that it is the individual's ability to navigate the ever-shifting role of audience and performer that creates space for agency within dance/music traditions, thus allowing ritual transformation to occur.

Art historian Patrick McNaughton affirms my convictions in his discussion of performer-audience relationships in West African masquerade rituals:

> Performers provide entertainment for audiences. But their interaction is by no means one-way. In fact, the symbolic relationship between the performers and the audience is nothing short of artistic co-dependence. Performers feed off audiences, who often share a familiarity with the characters, ideas, and values the performers put at play. This mutual familiarity fuels the excitement of anticipation, the evaluation of execution, and the appreciation of improvisation, and all of that together takes the event out of the realm of mere spectatorship and into the realm of created experience.[52]

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

On the other hand, I reassert that non-African or nonlocal observers who lack the cultural knowledge necessary for participation are often unaware of the improvisation that takes place in African performances. Drewal, among other scholars previously mentioned, suggests that this is in part responsible for the dearth of writing on the subject.[53]

In her essay, "Improvisation as Participatory Performance: Egungun Masked Dancers in the Yoruba Tradition," Drewal expands upon her statements concerning the improvisational practices that are characteristic of the Yoruba traditions found in southwestern Nigeria and southern Benin. It is interesting to note that this essay is embedded in the larger anthology, *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader*, which claims to cover a wide variety of dance contexts but is mostly concerned with the U.S. postmodern idiom.[54] Once again, Drewal describes the improvisational nature of Yoruba performance:

> Periodically repeated, unscripted performance, including ritual, music, and dance in Africa, is improvisational. Most performers—maskers, dancers, diviners, singers, and drummers—have been trained from childhood in particular techniques enabling them to play spontaneously with learned, in-body formulas.[55]

Once again, it is evident that a mutual knowledge of cultural traditions is necessary to allow for individual agency within these dance/music and/or ritual traditions. It is a constant cycle: the process of individuals learning and communicating dance/music traditions lends itself to the transformation of those traditions. This knowledge is then passed forward, and so on.

Additionally, Drewal also speaks to the interconnectedness of dance (specifically improvisation) and everyday life. Because dance is so prevalent in many African cultures, children who are surrounded by dance from an early age are able to assimilate specific dance and music traditions via observation and participation during ritual events.[56] In contrast, improvisation in contexts of modern concert dance has historically been used as a compositional tool for choreography; typically, there is a generation of ideas through improvisation and a subsequent honing of material.[57] Therefore, in a modern dance culture that values set choreography, improvisation is part of a compositional process, but not always part of the finished product.[58] In an attempt to challenge these norms, postmodern artists have often utilized improvisation in performance to expose the process of dance making.[59] Thus, although both context sites utilize improvisation in performance, each does so for different, culturally specific reasons, and until now, the African usage in the Diaspora has rarely been fathomed.

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Influence of Music in Dance Improvisation

It is important to discuss the role of music within improvisation practices because rhythm is integral to the Africanist conception of improvisation. African drumming often "involves acts of spontaneous creation, unique and impermanent, but it is . . . bounded by strictures of style and by the training, technique, experiences, and habits of a given performer."[60] Just as drummers must work within a standard rhythm before adding embellishment or variation, dancers must first embody the rhythms of the drum before adding personal flair or experimenting with innovation. Rhythm is integral to the relationship between dancer and musician, and improvisation then becomes a conversation among participating parties.

Margaret Thompson Drewal references how dancers "catch the rhythm" in Yoruba traditions: "The idea is that the dance 'catches' the dancer as the dancer begins to 'catch' the nuances of the music."[61] A Yoruba dancer "catches" external rhythms that are so internalized by training that it's almost as if they originate from within. This connection to rhythm contrasts heavily with the postmodern urge to strip dance of theatrical elements such as music and lighting.[62]

Dance scholar Francesca Castaldi expands upon the idea that rhythm is inherent in Africanist understandings of improvisation when she speaks to the polyrhythmic nature of African dance. In *Choreographies of African Identities*, she writes:

> A polyrhythmic model presents us with differentiated layers (nonhomologous relationships) within which different rules of improvisation apply (degrees of freedom) as well as with a circular (nonlinear) mode of connections that refer to each other without claiming an absolute point of origin.[63]

Castaldi posits that the polyrhythmic Africanist aesthetic lends itself to the improvisational nature of African dance and music styles. According to Castaldi, the polyrhythms give the master drummer the power to occasionally break from established patterns and improvise. Echoing previous scholars, Castaldi clarifies that improvisation requires a deep knowledge of tradition in order to remain within the harmony of established interactions; thus, an inexperienced drummer does not usually possess the necessary skills to improvise, nor does an inexperienced dancer. Castaldi, like Drewal, mentions that dancers and drummers, as "masters of their own traditions," contribute to the ever-evolving nature of dance/music traditions. She reaffirms my assertion that improvisation is a skill that grants the artist agency to contribute to the evolution of dance/music traditions.

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Castaldi also speaks to the issue of ownership. Polyrhythms lend themselves to a circular logic that resists an absolute point of origin. This aspect of Africanist philosophy contradicts European and Euro-American conceptions of improvisation. In the latter, ownership continues to permeate conversations surrounding dance; the focus is on what one artist can or cannot do, has or has not done, in relationship to another. On the other hand, improvisation as an Africanist aesthetic rejects the notion that there is a single creator, owner, or point of origin. Instead, the participants contribute to the improvisation, and the improvisation contributes to the dance event and tradition at large.

As I mentioned earlier, during my time in Ouagadougou, I had the opportunity to perform on a live television show called *L'Emission Cocktail* that presents local music and dance. Awa choreographed a basic outline for our presentation alongside several other dancers, but there were moments for individual improvisation and interaction with the audience, thus contributing to and evolving the event at large. This also demonstrates improvisation as performance.

Also, regarding improvisation from a musical standpoint, ethnomusicologist Paul F. Berliner analyzes the *mbira* traditions of the Shona in Zimbabwe.[64] Berliner confirms that improvisation is part of African performance and that it relies on both the knowledge and the skill of the musician, as well as the character of a given piece. He provides a glimpse into *how* improvisation occurs in an Africanist context. According to Berliner, artists "have a storehouse of basic patterns and musical formulae from which they draw patterns and combine them in different ways during a performance."[65] Because there is no prescribed order in which to play variations, no two musical events are identical.[66] Thus, not only do we get a sense of the parameters in which improvisation takes place, but we are able to see the ways in which skilled artists innovate within the structures of tradition.

As a result of the merging of many African and several European cultures, so foundational within the United States, the continuity of improvisation can be found in the diasporic forms of jazz music (and dance), *tap*, and *hip-hop* dances, among others. Improvisation is so prominent in jazz music that it has become a seminal construct and primary goal within the art form, used to establish the distinct and emerging voices within the music tradition. In the context of jazz music, two recurring themes surface: innovation-within-tradition and the necessity of deep traditional knowledge before improvisation can occur. Berliner confirms that the popular definition of improvisation as spontaneous and intuitive "belies the discipline and experience on which [jazz] improvisers depend."[67] He also extends improvisation past the indi-

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

vidual to a group experience in his discussion of jazz bands. He says: "The operations of improvisation involving more than one person require the instant assimilation of ideas across the band's membership . . . band members endeavor to interact flexibly in order to accommodate one another."[68]

The concept of an "improv jam," associated with contact improvisation in the modern concert dance world, is taken from "jam sessions" in the jazz music world, where jazz musicians come together to create and explore through improvisation.[69] This is yet another example of how a dominant culture asserts the power of propagation while less economically powerful cultures often become marginalized.

Dance scholar Cheryl Willis augments this discussion in her essay "Tap Dance: Manifestation of the African Aesthetic." She affirms that "tap dance, comparable to jazz music, and African music and dance, employs improvisation" in such a way that no two performances are identical.[70] Dancers work within the vocabulary and rhythmic style of *tap* but have the liberty to play with artistic expression and musical structures, such as syncopation. Willis also points out that solos are rich opportunities for improvisation; however, the dancer is not completely "free" to take off in a flight of self-expression and must remain in constant conversation with the musician, which is a direct reflection of African influence.

Dancer/theorist Goldman further elaborates on the word "freedom" and its associations with improvisation and speaks about improvisation in a variety of contexts. Indeed, her study covers topics such as collaborations between dancers and jazz musicians and contact improvisation as a form of nonviolent protest, among others. Through her discussions, both the complexities and the circulation of influences that inform different understandings of dance improvisation become clear.

U.S. Vernacular Dance and Improvisation

Turning to improvisation in African American vernacular dance, the analysis of improvisation encompasses a wide range of social dances, dating from the plantation era to twentieth century *hip-hop*; these dances also adhere to the Africanist aesthetic of improvisation. Reinforcing a direct link between continental and diasporic African forms, artist and scholar Jonathan David Jackson asserts that a thorough knowledge of social dance forms is necessary in order to begin improvising within a given form. He suggests that, much like in both jazz music (and *jazz dance*) and also in *tap* dance, where improvisation largely determines the structure of a performance, "in African American vernacular dancing, improvisation *is* choreography."[71] While

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

European and North American art forms tend to value composition above improvisation and see these concepts as two separate entities, in African and diasporic forms this dichotomy does not exist. Jackson reaffirms the "inseparability between sound and movement" in African American vernacular forms, which is another clear reflection of African traditions.

In his analyses, Jackson also posits two interrelated symbolic fields that are useful in uncovering the purpose of improvisation. He identifies "individuation" and "ritualization" in vernacular contexts. Individuation constitutes the dancer's negotiation of her/his/their personal style, inviting the viewer to witness his/her/their assertion of physical prowess and inventiveness and promoting the evolution of dance traditions. Individuals can use tools, such as repetition and layering, to enhance their performance and organize movement, emphasizing the composition that takes place in the moment of movement. Entwined with individuation is ritualization, which establishes the community organization of an ongoing and/or repeatable event.[72] Whether the event involves working together or competing, ritualization implies the negotiation of group dynamics.

One such ritual event, the freestyle *hip-hop* battle, exemplifies the recurring theme of individual and group relationships. To participate in such a battle "is to put one's name on the line and test one's self" in the spirit of competition and one-upmanship.[73] Participants perform physical displays of prowess, attempting to prove themselves through inventive, challenging moves in order to gain status within the community. The freestyling artist's desire to create an individual style and the jazz improviser's life pursuit for a unique artistic voice are prime examples of Jackson's premise of individuation. It is from competition with the self and others that innovation arises. Improvisation is assumed to be partly responsible for the evolution of these social dances, both across time and through interaction with other cultures.

Carving a Space for Future Research

I have learned much since my initial, sociocultural, and biased assumption, which emerged with improvisation as "of the moment" movement. Improvisation frequently profits from more than a willing and able body and mind. Recognizing improvisation as an aesthetic of African dance forms permits comprehension of the immense intricacies of different culturally informed approaches to improvisation. Through the dissection and comparison of related dance, music, and cultural scholarship, the aesthetic and philosophical underpinnings of dance improvisation in Africanist contexts have emerged.

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

While much has been said about the defining characteristics of African dance, much of the writing on improvisation in African dance forms is intertextual and, as we have seen, is buried within texts that focus on African music and dances of the African Diaspora, especially in the United States. Here, such limitations have been minimalized; the examination of dispersed texts and almost-hidden understandings, which I have gathered for close scrutiny, have revealed the participatory, inclusive nature that connects dancer, musician, and spectator in wondrous and learned dance movements. Additionally, the agency of performers and their sensitivity to structured innovation, which define improvisation as an Africanist aesthetic, have been clearly analyzed for broad understanding—for observers, critics, and other researchers. Distinctions have been made between words ("spontaneous" and "spontaneity") and among contexts (African, Diaspora, and European or North American). Thus, this chapter has provided a launching point for future research in improvisation as an Africanist aesthetic.

My focus on identified characteristics of dance improvisation within an Africanist aesthetic broadens contemporary understandings of dance improvisation. Although much work has yet to be done, I have here illuminated important voices that are often absent from current considerations of dance improvisation in U.S. American academia. In doing so, my hope is that we gain a more inclusive understanding of improvisation as it pertains to the field of dance. Starting with this analysis of improvisation as agency in African dance, a next step may be to look closer at existing dance curricula to ensure that a multitude of approaches and understandings of dance improvisation are included. We must honor and validate the vast range of experiences and perspectives that contribute to dance improvisation. It is my ultimate wish that the rhythm of these words may catch hold for future research on dance improvisation within the Africanist aesthetic.

Notes

1. The Mossi are the largest ethnic group in central Burkina Faso, but they also live in Mali, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Benin, and Togo. Although my collaborator was born and raised in the capital, only half of her family is from Burkina Faso; the other half is from Ghana.

2. Over the course of this research, I turn to artist/scholar Kariamu Welsh (formerly Welsh Asante) to clarify the concept of "tradition." In her book (cited below), Welsh distinguishes between traditional and neotraditional, acknowledges the ever-changing nature of tradition, and, referencing dance scholar Peggy Harper, addresses the fact that changes in lifestyle, due to factors such as colonization and urbanization, have resulted in neotraditional dance form. Meanings and movements may not nec-

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

essarily change, but the context in which the dance is learned and performed does. Kariamu Welsh, *Zimbabwe Dance: Rhythmic Forces, Ancestral Voices: An Aesthetic Analysis* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World, 2000), 25–28.

3. See also Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 12–28.

4. See Sally Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2011 [1987]); Ramsey Burt, *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces* (London: Routledge, 2006); Susan Leigh Foster, *Dances that Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2002).

5. Jane C. Desmond, ed., "Embodying Difference: Issues in Dance and Cultural Studies," *Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance*, ed. Jane C. Desmond (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997), 29–54.

6. Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), xiii.

7. Although I cite dance scholar, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, who adapted and used the term inside of a dance context (see *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* [Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1996] and *The Black Dancing Body*), the term "Africanist" was first used by anthropologist, Melville J. Herskovits in his work *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958 [1941]), 1–32. It has since been used by contemporary African American scholars Joseph Holloway (see *Africanisms in American Culture* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990]) and Toni Morrison (see *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992]), among others.

8. See Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence*.

9. Robert Farris Thompson, *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), 5–45.

10. Ibid., 17–18.

11. Ibid., 18. I will elaborate on this in the next section. Discussions of improvisation are often presented as subtexts within texts, though several scholars do explicitly discuss the improvisational nature of African performance.

12. Ibid., 43–45.

13. Ibid., 41.

14. See also Gottschild, *Digging*, 13.

15. Kariamu Welsh Asante, "Commonalities in African Dance: An Aesthetic Foundation," in *African Culture: Rhythms of Unity*, ed. Molefi Asante and Kariamu Welsh Asante (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1985), 72; reprinted in *Moving History / Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader*, ed. Ann Dils and Ann Cooper Albright (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 144–51.

16. Ibid. (2001), 145.

17. Gottschild, *Digging*, 11–19.

18. Ibid., 25.

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

19. Gottschild, *Digging*, 31.

20. Desmond, "Embodying Differences," 34.

21. DeFrantz, "The Black Beat Made Visible: Hip Hop Dance and Body Power," in *Of the Presence of the Body: Essays on Dance and Performance Theory*, ed. Andre Lepecki (Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 75.

22. See Marshall Winslow Stearns and Jean Stearns, *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Schirmer, 1979).

23. Ibid., xiv.

24. Ibid., 14–15.

25. *Warba* is the primary celebration dance of the Mossi, the largest ethnic group in central Burkina Faso, and the national dance of Burkina Faso. *Warba* is characterized by a constant, vigorous shaking of the hips along the transverse plane of the body (that which separates the upper and lower halves of the body). The hips move in isolation of the rest of the body as the dancer performs a variety of footsteps and arm gestures. The buttocks are allowed to release and shake in response to the movement of the hips. A short skirt of braided cotton and bells worn at the waist, ankles, and held by hand are part of the traditional costume for this dance. This percussive adornment accentuates the polyrhythms that permeate this dance.

26. See Dolores Kirton Cayou, *Modern Jazz Dance* (Palo Alto, Calif.: National Press Books, 1971); Dolores Kirton Cayou, "The Origins of Modern Jazz Dance," *Black Scholar* 42, no. 2 (1970): 8–13.

27. Cayou, "Origins," 9; Cayou, *Modern Jazz Dance*, 6.

28. Cayou, "Origins," 12.

29. See Katrina Hazzard-Gordon (later Hazzard-Donald), *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

30. Ibid., xi–3.

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

32. Ibid., 1–15.

33. See also, Gottschild, *Digging*; Thompson, *African Art*; Welsh, "Commonalities."

34. Malone, *Steppin'*, 10–11.

35. DeFrantz, "Black Beat," 69.

36. Malone, *Steppin'*, 9–10.

37. *Oxford English Dictionary*, "improvisation" (2nd ed. Oxford; Oxford University Press: Clarendon, 1989).

38. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 119.

39. Danielle Goldman, *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 5.

40. See Kofi Agawu, "African Music as Text," *Research in African Literatures* 32, no. 2 (2001): 8–16.

41. See Paul Berliner et al, *Thinking in Jazz: The Infinite Art of Improvisation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994); Cayou, *Modern Jazz Dance*; William Jelani Cobb,

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

To the Break of Dawn: A Freestyle on the Hip Hop Aesthetic (New York: New York University Press, 2007); Gottschild, *Digging*; Jonathan David Jackson, "Improvisation in African-American Vernacular Dancing," *Dance Research Journal* 33, no .2 (2001): 40–53.

42. For example, see Kofi Agawu, *African Rhythm: A Northern Ewe Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Kofi Agawu, "The Invention of African Rhythm," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (1995): 380–95; Paul Berliner, *The Soul of Mbira: Music and Traditions of the Shona People of Zimbabwe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Berliner et al., *Thinking in Jazz*.

43. See Agawu, *African Rhythm*; Agawu, "The Invention of African Rhythm," 8–16; Agawu, "African Music as Text," 380–95; Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*; Margaret Thompson Drewal, "Improvisation as Participatory Performance: Egungun Masked Dancers in the Yoruba Tradition," in *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader*, ed. Ann Cooper Albright and David Gere (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 119–32; Alphonse Tiérou, *Dooplé: The Eternal Law of African Dance,* 2 Vol. (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic, 1992).

44. Tiérou, *Dooplé*, 19.

45. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, xiii–23.

46. Ibid., 12–28.

47. See also Drewal, "Improvisation," 119–21.

48. John J. MacAloon et al., *Rite, Drama, Festival, Spectacle: Rehearsals Toward a Theory of Cultural Performance* (Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1984), 243–44.

49. See also Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual*, 15, and "Improvisation as Participatory Performance," 121.

50. Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual,* 15

51. Drewal, "Improvisation," 119.

52. Patrick R. McNaughton, *A Bird Dance Near Saturday City: Sidi Ballo and the Art of West African Masquerade* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 53.

53. Drewal, "Improvisation," 119.

54. See Ann Cooper Albright and David Gere, eds., *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).

55. Drewal, "Improvisation," 119.

56. Ibid., 120.

57. See Sally Banes, "Spontaneous Combustion: Notes on Dance Improvisation from the Sixties to the Nineties," in Albright and Gere, *Taken by Surprise*, 77–85; Foster, *Dances That Describe*; Cynthia J. Novack, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1990).

58. Novack, *Sharing the Dance*, 23.

59. Banes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, xii–19.

60. Drewal, "Improvisation," 123–24.

61. Ibid.

62. Francesca Castaldi, *Choreographies of African Identities: Negritude, Dance,*

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

and the National Ballet of Senegal (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 8; see also Robert Farris Thompson, “An Aesthetic of the Cool,” *African Arts* 7, no. 1 (1973): 41–91.

63. Castaldi, *Choreographies of African Identities*, 10–11.

64. Commonly referred to as a “finger piano,” “thumb piano,” or “hand piano,” the mbira is a popular traditional instrument throughout Africa. Here, the mbira is located among the Shona, a Bantu-speaking people in parts of Mozambique and Zambia. Although a great variety of mbira exist, each consists of “a soundboard, a method of amplifying the sound, usually some device for producing the buzzing quality that characterizes mbira music, and, of course, a set of keys” (Berliner, *Soul of Mbira*, 9–10, 18).

65. Ibid., 119.

66. Ibid., 95–111.

67. Berliner et al., *Thinking in Jazz*, 497.

68. Ibid., 492.

69. Gottschild, *Digging*, 55.

70. Cheryl Willis, “Tap Dance: Manifestation of the African Aesthetic,” in *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*, ed. Kariamu Welsh Asante (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World, 1996), 151.

71. Jackson, “Improvisation,” 42.

72. Ibid., 41–46.

73. Cobb, *To the Break of Dawn*, 78.

This content downloaded from
68.116.193.89 on Wed, 31 Aug 2022 18:23:34 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms