A STUDY OF DANCE IMPROVISATION IN AFRICANIST AND POST-MODERN CONTEXTS AS EXPERIENCED BY PHILADELPHIA-BASED ARTISTS

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by
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the philosophical and aesthetic characteristics of dance improvisation in two enormous contexts: Africanist dance forms and the diverse genres that this term encompasses, and postmodern dance practices that grew out of the work of the Judson Dance Theater in the sixties. The impetus for this study grew out of previous research in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in West Africa where I collaborated with a Burkinabe dancer to uncover how our histories influence our approach to movement-making. I soon realized that we possessed different understandings of dance improvisation, and I endeavor to unpack those differences in this study. I seek to evidence the range of understandings of dance improvisation that exist in the United States by including the voices of six Philadelphia-based artists whom I have interviewed for the purpose of this research. Although I initially contacted Olivier Tarpaga, Zakiya Cornish, and Cachet Ivey for their work with African dance genres, and Esther Baker-Tarpaga, Marion Ramirez, and Molly Shanahan for their work with postmodern practices of improvisation, the amount of overlap between the two contexts soon became apparent. In exposing the diverse practices of improvisation, I hope to spark a conversation about what constitutes dance improvisation in the United States.

DEDICATION

I sincerely dedicate this thesis to my parents, family, and loved ones.

I am beyond grateful for their unwavering support.

This has been a whirlwind of a year, and without them I could not have accomplished this undertaking.

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I would like to thank my committed advisor, Dr. Kariamu Welsh, for seeing the value of this project and agreeing to work alongside me. Her insight proved to be indispensable, and together, we were able to carve a space for future research in this area of study. I cannot thank her enough for her feedback and guidance throughout this process.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

My first memory of dance improvisation is in a small studio in the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio circa 2004: The teacher dimmed the lights, set out three objects—a folding chair, a hula hoop, and a large wooden cube—and told us to improvise. Although I am sure that I had engaged in improvised movement as a child before this instance, this was the first time in my life that the act of creating-movement-in-the-moment was given a name. As a young dancer in the studio, to improvise was to string together steps that I recalled learning in class. As a child outside the studio, to create-movement-in-the-moment was to move my body in ways that felt good, drawing inspiration from things that I had seen—either a television program, a book, or a show that my parents brought me to—that were then absorbed into my body.

Fast forward to 2011, when I went on to pursue a BFA in dance at The Ohio State University. Here, I became exposed to dance improvisation in academia, learning the improvisational approaches of artists such as Steve Paxton, Nancy Stark Smith, Simone Forti, Lisa Nelson, Deborah Hay, and Barbara Dilley. All of these artists are a product of the experimental branch of American performance that broke away from mid-twentieth century American modern dance;[1] all have been directly involved with, or have learned from the lineage of, Merce Cunningham, the Judson Dance Theater,[2] or the Grand Union.[3] Further still, all are white artists associated with the "Downtown Dance"[4] era of the 1960s and 1970s in New York City. In the review of relevant literature, I will return to the contributions of these artists in more detail. That said, only in retrospect do I realize the limited understandings of dance improvisation taught in the university setting.

Fast forward once again to 2014: I conducted research in Burkina Faso, a landlocked country in West Africa, collaborating with a Burkinabe dancer to uncover how our sociocultural backgrounds influence our approaches to dance. My collaborator, a tall, slender Mossi[5] woman in her late twenties, welcomed me into her apartment for the duration of my eight-week stay. In addition to living with and experiencing quotidienne life alongside her, we took classes together and taught one another on a daily basis. We danced in studios with raised wooden floors and ceiling fans, as well as open-air dance spaces with red-clay-speckled cement floors. Although we ventured out to several villages, we spent the majority of our time in Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, a bustling and vibrant metropolis full of life and art.

Originally, 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. At the time, I was unable able to recognize the set of predispositions that influenced our interactions and dictated our exchange, however, I quickly discovered the immense differences in our approaches to improvisation: While mine stems from a postmodern aesthetic in the United States, hers derives from the rhythmic play and innovation-within-form that define the neo-traditional[6] West African dances in which she trained. While I was eager to reflect and analyze, my

collaborator was uninterested in such methodologies. According to my collaborator, as a child she would wander into dance classes in her neighborhood, 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. For her, improvisation was so interwoven into her creative process; one could not be extracted from the other. Thus, it became necessary to negotiate and communicate to find a shared place from which to work.

As I mentioned, despite my preliminary research efforts, I had not considered the fact that I was working within a different framework of movement improvisation than my collaborator, albeit one that has roots in African aesthetics. Even as I obsessed over tracing my dancing history and asked her to do the same, I neglected to consider where each of our experiences of improvisation fell on this historical continuum. And although I debriefed her on the goals of my research, I did not take into account what tracing her dance history meant to her, if anything. It was not until I began the process of movement exchange with my collaborator that I became aware of the deeply rooted connection between our seemingly different approaches to improvisation. That said, several differences became clear immediately, while others were discovered over time, but I was able to organize a series of prominent characteristics that stood out in each of our differing approaches. These characteristics include music, movement choice, inspiration, and motivation or purpose:

Whereas music is often absent or merely atmospheric in my personal practice, music was an integral part of improvisation for my collaborator. Whether she was working with traditional or popular dance forms, it was necessary for her to integrate some genre of

upbeat, rhythmic music.[7] Rhythm was intrinsic to her movement, and it demanded the support of a drum or other percussive song. Indeed, this is precisely why I often avoid rhythmic music; I find it overpowers my movement and distracts me from my other agendas, such as focusing on sensation. My interest lies within what happened when we attempted to work inside of the other's musical preference. Reviewing filmed footage, I found that my collaborator maintained an internal rhythmic awareness so deeply ingrained in her body that it persisted even in silence; her improvisations looked quite similar with and without music. This was not so in my case: I noted that I either deliberately resisted the beat or found myself engaging in percussive movement that accentuated the rhythm of the music. Upon reflection, I recognize that my relationship to music results from the postmodern urge to strip dance of expressive elements such as music, lighting, costume, and props.[8] At the same time, in my percussive, rhythmic explorations, I began to grasp the Africanist influences on American postmodern dance such as "the aesthetic of the cool."[9] As art historian Robert Farris Thompson explains, coolness is an attitude that reflects the moral underpinnings of many African societies. Among many things, the term "cool" represents an all-embracing sense of composure and self-control that permeates various aspects of society[10] or "the self's equilibrium in responding to the unpredictable flux of life."[11] I will elaborate upon this and other influences in the review of relevant literature. With that in mind, it became evident that our senses of musicality stemmed from our respective dance roots.

Aside from our different training and backgrounds, our movement choices and inspiration appeared connected to our relation to music. As I said, I either chose to resist

the rhythm or adhere to its structure, whereas my collaborator gravitated toward exploring the layers of the rhythm. Further, I tended to stay within a postmodern framework, drawing on the movement that my body was most comfortable with, and sporadically happening upon balletic postures and moments of West African movement that remained in my body from previous training. Likewise, my collaborator worked with neo-traditional, contemporary, and popular West African movement forms and occasionally broke out of these bodily habits. We remained in our comfort zones until, drawing inspiration from one another, we felt moved to take a different course. Generally, regardless of the choices we made, we both drew some sort of inspiration from music and other dancers. This attention to group dynamics suggests another underlying commonality between our perceptions of improvisation: As I will elaborate upon, African dances are participatory in nature; musicians, dancers, and spectators feed off of one another and contribute to the dance event at large.[12] Similarly, postmodern dance collectives often explored group dynamics, collaborating with musicians, visual artists, and audience members to create an improvised dance event.[13] Such work opposed traditional Western concert dance configurations which separate audience from performer, dancer from musician.[14] Drawing from scholars in the field of dance studies such as Brenda Dixon Gottschild, I argue that the standard dancer-dancer and dancer-audience relationships in Western concert dance forms are complicated by influences of African diasporic and African-American vernacular dance.[15]

Furthermore, another underlying commonality is our motivation, or purpose, for improvising. Both my collaborator and I used improvisation as a choreographic tool, although we were working within entirely different performance contexts. My collaborator,

who was immersed in the world of music videos and live music shows in Ouagadougou, was often requested to choreograph for backup dancers. I witnessed many of her rehearsals during my time there, and was able to see how she composed both traditional and popular dance forms, playing with style and adding personal flair to suit the music with which she was working. Again, improvisation seemed to be inherent in the movement itself. It arose out of her respect and knowledge of tradition, which was deep-seated in her muscles and bones with such finesse that experimentation was a part of her process: Innovation-within-tradition. Although I utilize the term "tradition," I acknowledge its ever-evolving nature with respect to changing contexts and lifestyles.[16] On the other hand, in a Western dance context, improvisation is often a separate practice, a personal exploration used to gain bodily awareness.[17] Even when used as a choreographic tool it is an isolated event; typically, there is a generation of ideas through improvisation and a subsequent honing of material. As I will explain, even when improvisation is used in postmodern performance contexts, it involves a deliberate rejection of traditional performance structures. For my collaborator, however, improvisation was elemental to the movement itself, regardless of the venue. It could be a rehearsal, traditional celebration, television broadcast, or nightclub, and improvisatory tools were applied.

Although the course of our collaboration changed once I became aware of our different perceptions, improvisation was still used as a starting point to begin our exchange. While our daily sessions didn't consist solely of the free-writing, meditation, and improvisational scores that I had planned for, we did engage in various approaches to dance improvisation. Notably, we learned just as much, if not more, about each other's movement

styles during impromptu dance parties at friends' houses and at nightclubs in the city; "spontaneous" moments of culturally informed movement. 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 in the hot sun with several friends for a bus that seemed impossibly late, we began dancing to pass time, which progressed into an Azonto dance party. (My collaborator always had a portable speaker prepared for random-acts-of-dancing.) This roadside event exemplifies "spontaneous" cultural exchange at its finest.

While these instances of improvisation were of-the-moment, it is important to note the skill and knowledge that is 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."[18] Etymologically speaking, the word has been used to describe music, poetry, and theater in a Western context.[19] Both the definition and origin of the word reveal its inherent limitations: A focus on extemporaneous actions in Western art forms.

Indeed, as I will expand upon, the use of the term "improvisation" is largely a Western phenomenon; thus, I argue that the phrase "stylistic innovation within form" is better suited to represent the act of "spontaneous" creation that occurs in the context of this study.[20] Even then, to consider improvisation as "spontaneous" creation raises a number of concerns. As Danielle Goldman elaborates upon in the introduction of *I Want to be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, relegating the innovation that exists within

traditional forms to thoughtless, spontaneous acts disregards the skill-set that is necessary to perform such acts:

> 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.[21]

In Ouagadougou, I experienced first-hand the ways in which cultural knowledge is ingrained in our bodies. My collaborator's body, deeply cognizant of traditional Burkinabe movement, possessed a sensitivity to rhythm that enabled her to negotiate within the form. I noted during a Warba[22] 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 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 the Warba's 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 a final note, in one of our conversations about what improvisation means in our respective dance lives my collaborator said to me, "*C'est dans les improvisations ou on trouve des bonnes choses*." You find good things in improvisations. We both agreed that improvisation enhances both of our dance lives, but in order to get a better sense of what those "good things" are, it is vital to consider the coiled histories of our particular cultures and the Africanist presence in the United States that gave rise to improvisation in both

diasporic and postmodern contexts. In the layered histories of improvisation in the United States, the proliferation of postmodern practices of improvisation begins with the Judson Dance Theater,[23] and the Africanist contributions to improvisation are often overlooked.[24] The word "improvisation" itself is laden with a myriad of connotations that reflect the history of white supremacy that I further explore in later chapters.

Thus, after acknowledging my own cultural biases, I am aware of the necessity to trace the African influences on improvisation in the United States, and to expand upon the aesthetic and philosophical similarities and differences of improvisation in African dance forms versus those of postmodern practices which define much of my experience as a dancer. As I uncover the philosophical and aesthetic differences between postmodern and Africanist approaches to improvisation, I work to problematize the existing binaries between these contexts. I also work to challenge my initial prejudices as a dancer who has been trained within the postmodern idiom.

Furthermore, by exposing a range of approaches to improvisation, I intend for this research to be a catalyst in sparking conversations about what constitutes dance improvisation in the United States. The focus on postmodern understandings of improvisation is reflected in both the proliferation of scholarly writing on the subject, and the dearth of literature concerning other approaches to improvisation in academia. Additionally, throughout this study, I acknowledge my own positionality as a white American woman. As such, I carry with me a set of privileges and biases that I attempt to challenge as I engage with researching Africanist understandings of improvisation. Moreover, although I make references to "African" music and dance and "Africanist"

approaches to improvisation over the course of this study, I do not wish to essentialize the diversity of traditions and perspectives that exist inside of these blanket terms. I reference Brenda Dixon Gottschild to clarify that “the term ‘Africanist’ refers to concepts, practices, attitudes, or forms that have roots/origins in Africa and the African diaspora”[25] while acknowledging the diverse range of practices that this term encompasses.[26]

Limitations and Delimitations of the Research

In this study, I acknowledge the collapsibility of the ostensible binary between Africanist and postmodern improvisational 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.[27] Additionally, although I have chosen three Philadelphia-based artists whose work is heavily influenced by the Africanist aesthetic and three Philadelphia-based artists who work primarily in the postmodern aesthetic, the interviews have revealed a massive amount of overlap, highlighting the diverse set of influences on each artist’s work. However, this is both a limitation and a strength of this study, as I aim to make a claim for the diverse range of improvisational dance practices that exist in the United States.

At the same time, I have delimited this work to include the voices of only six Philadelphia-based artists who have worked within a variety of settings; coincidentally, although they teach in a variety of settings, all six artists are dance educators. Thus, this study is in no way a comprehensive representation of the scope of improvisational dance practices that exist in the United States. Additionally, my desire to contribute to the

minimal existing scholarship on Africanist approaches to dance stems from my research in Burkina Faso. Using my experiences as impetus, I establish the scope of this research to focus on Africanist and postmodern improvisational contexts. In doing so, I recognize that this excludes a vast range of cultures and dance forms that utilize improvisation for a variety of purposes.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The purpose of this study is to examine the role of improvisation in Africanist and American-postmodern contexts as evidenced by the work of six Philadelphia-based artists. In order to support my research inquiries, I employ the findings from a series of one-on-one interviews with six Philadelphia-based artists who utilize improvisation in their work. In accordance with the guidelines of Temple University's Institutional Review Board, all interviewees are required to sign a consent form that details the scope of the research and their involvement. Zakiya Cornish, Olivier Tarpaga, and Cachet Ivey all have experience with Africanist approaches to improvisation while Molly Shanahan, Marion Ramirez, and Esther Baker-Tarpaga draw from postmodern understandings of improvisation in their work. That being said, each artist does not work within definite boundaries of one context or the other, and there is a great deal of overlap in each artist's approach. Additionally, although I do not analyze the role of gender in this study, it is worth noting that my informants consist of only one male and five females. With that in mind, I seek to understand the aesthetic and philosophical similarities and differences between the practices of improvisation in each context. Furthermore, I seek to illuminate the "invisibilized"[28] Africanist approaches to improvisation that exist in the United States; while they 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.

In order to carry out this study, it is necessary to conduct an in-depth, critical review of literature surrounding the history of improvisation in the United States, Africanist

aesthetics, and postmodern dance practices. Due to the paucity of literature surrounding the uses of improvisation in African dance contexts, it is necessary to take an intertextual approach to uncovering improvisation as an Africanist aesthetic. That is, it is necessary to comb through scholarship written on the use of improvisation in African diasporic contexts such as jazz, tap, and hip-hop in order to unearth the intersecting histories of an "Africanist" approach to improvisation. Moreover, even as I trace the lineage of the Judson Dance Theater and Grand Union in the sixties and seventies[29] to contextualize many of the current postmodern approaches to improvisation, I problematize the emphasis placed on these practices in dominant historical narratives that overshadow other influential forces. In order to conduct this literature review, I use multiple sources of information including books, academic journals, and periodicals, to provide a historical and theoretical framework for my study. In doing so, I expose gaps in existing research, justifying the goal to illuminate the often invisibilized presence of Africanist influences on dance, specifically dance improvisation, in the United States.

Defining the Africanist Aesthetic

Several artists have laid a groundwork for formally defining characteristics common to dances of Africa and the African diaspora, including Robert Farris Thompson, Marshall and Jean Stearns, Dolores K. Cayou, Katrina Hazzard-Donald, Jacqui Malone, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, and Kariamu Welsh. In his work, *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:

> (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.[30]

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.[31] Moreover, the author 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."[32] As I will elaborate upon 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.

Additionally, Robert Farris Thompson posits the notion of "an aesthetic of the cool" that permeates African and African American social contexts.[33] As the author 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.[34] 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.[35] Although Thompson only briefly mentions dance in his work, he acknowledges the interconnectivity of art and life that exists in many African cultures. Scholars such as Brenda Dixon Gottschild expand 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*, Brenda Dixon Gottschild contributes significantly to the uncovering of Africanist influences on American culture that have been invisibilized by dominant European perceptions. In doing so, 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 conflict, polycentrism and polyrhythm, high-affect juxtaposition, ephebism, and drawing from Robert Farris Thompson, "the aesthetic of the cool."[36] Furthermore, Gottschild acknowledges that Africanist aesthetics pervade dance forms in the United States, though they are not always credited as such.

Throughout her book, Brenda Dixon Gottschild illuminates the "invisibilized" Africanist presence in the United States. This phenomenon is due in part to the "whitenizing" of black cultures to please European American ideals.[37] Thus, when white America borrowed African-derived traditions, they transformed certain facets of the culture that disagreed with their own while other aspects remained. According to Gottschild, white Americans have adopted everything from hairstyles to physical and verbal mannerisms

from African American culture, drawn to that which was perceived as "exotic" or "sexual" in nature.[38] The urge to improvise is another example of a borrowed aesthetic that persisted.[39] 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 when they "toned down," "tamed," and "whitened" such popular social dances as the Turkey Trot and the Charleston."[40] 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.[41] Although DeFrantz raises more questions than he provides answers, his essay serves as a catalyst for important discussions about cultural appropriation.

To continue, choreographer and scholar of African dance Kariamu Welsh builds off of the theoretical concepts of Thompson and Gottschild in her essay, "Commonalities in African Dance: An Aesthetic Foundation." In acknowledging the fact that cultural anthropologists and ethnomusicologists "lack the perspective of a trained dancer, choreographer, or dance historian to properly analyze the movements and steps found in [African] dance,"[42] Welsh highlights a shortcoming of much of the existing writing on the subject: An attention to the intricacies of movement. She continues by explaining 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.[43]

According to Welsh, the oral tradition is both an art and a form of documentation. Additionally, Welsh posits that this word-of-mouth transmittance of history and art is, in part, responsible for the dearth of written documentation and notation of African dance.[44] Further, in her discussion of the oral principle, Welsh alludes to the issue of ownership, which I further explore in later chapters. Specifically, Welsh speaks of 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.[45]

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.

Moving forward, various scholars in the fields of musicology and dance studies have written specifically about dances of the African diaspora in the United States. Musicologists Marshall and Jean Stearns were of the first to write at length about the African origins of African American vernacular dance.[46] Focusing on jazz dance, Stearns and Stearns reveal a comingling of both European and African influences, however, it is the African influence that gives jazz dance, in general, its "rhythmic propulsion" and "swing."[47] Moreover, much can be gained from comparing Stearns and Stearns six characteristics of African dance to those that have been built from Robert Farris Thompson. The authors mention: (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.[48] Most notable is the problematic essentializing and superficiality of Stearns and Stearns' list of characteristics; while Thompson digs deeper into the inner-workings and philosophies of many African dances, Stearns and Stearns merely skim the surface of aesthetic qualities. Despite their limitations, the authors reinforce an important concept that I explore in this research: The integration of improvisation and rhythm in African dance.

To continue, dance scholar Dolores K. Cayou has written about the historical development of modern jazz dance, focusing on its origins in African dance forms.[49] In her discussion of characteristics that define African dance, Cayou presents several important qualities: "Individualism of style within the group style" and "functionalism—becoming what you dance—the art of real life."[50] First, it is important to note that while there is individuation and virtuosic moments in African dance, it is always in context of the group and always in relationship to the music and others, including the audience. Second, because art is often such an integral part of life, the entire community becomes enmeshed in the performance, blurring the boundaries between audience and performer.[51]

Sociologist and dance practitioner Katrina Hazzard-Donald has also written about the history of dance in the African diaspora, focusing on secular social dances.[52] Both Cayou and Hazzard-Donald briefly discuss the role of slavery in bringing African influences to the United States. Additionally, both Cayou and Hazzard-Donald speak of the integral role of music and movement in everyday life; however, Hazzard-Gordon argues that the strongest link to African dances can be found in African American social dances. Within African American social dances—such as the jook—lies a sense of

community and of personal identity within the group.[53] 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.[54]

Dance historian Jacqui Malone also contributes to the understanding of the sociocultural history and African roots of African American vernacular dance.[55] 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;[56] one does not exist without the other. Further, the sign of a good dancer is one's ability to converse with the music and to utilize various parts of the body to create visualizations of rhythm.[57] Here, Malone describes the qualities of polyrhythmicity and polycentricity.[58] Additionally, the author 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.[59]

Finally, as Thomas F. DeFrantz reminds us, "these categories of Africanist tendencies are broad enough to accommodate several generations of music and movement styles."[60] Indeed, Africa's music and dance styles are as diverse as the continent itself.[61] Thus, while the specific nuances and differences across genres and cultures cannot be ignored, this compiled set of characteristics serve as an all-encompassing platform from which more in-depth discussions can take place.

Improvisation as an Africanist Aesthetic

Improvisation existed in American art forms long before it was popularized in the 1960s Judson Dance era.[62] While notable research exists concerning the role of improvisation in various African-derived forms such a jazz and hip-hop,[63] scholarship focusing solely on improvisation in African dance is sparse, often buried within writing on African music and African American vernacular forms.[64] Despite the individual specificities of each work, one can begin to formulate a set of characteristics that define the philosophy and aesthetics of improvisation in African-derived movement forms. Briefly, such characteristics include a deep connectivity to rhythm, improvisation as performance, communication and participation between audience and performers, a mutual knowledge and understanding of tradition among participants, and embellishment and innovation within tradition.[65]

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 tradition. 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 posses a knowledge of rhythm and mastery of the dance, but they must be able to listen to one another with acuity, taking into account the 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 it embedded into traditional African dances.[66]

In her work, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency*, anthropologist Margaret Thompson Drewal argues that ritual involves a dialogue between past traditions and present practitioners, and posits that "ritual practitioners as knowledgeable human agents transform ritual itself through play and improvisation."[67] 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.[68] It must be noted that "play," in this sense, does not represent frivolous, idle leisure as it does to the Western capitalist; instead it acknowledges the skilled effort of trained artists whose knowledge contributes to the transformative nature of ritual.[69] 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 traditions, thus, performers do not break-free from the rituals of their ancestors but contribute to the continuation of the spirit of improvisation.[70] Moreover, improvisational play takes on diverse forms. Among many things, performers may reinterpret, recontextualize, intervene, or interrupt in a ritual event. According to Drewal, ritual is not rigid, but continuously under revision; the past is not static, but constantly evolving. Through improvisation, performers are able to transform ritual structures while adhering to the practices of their ancestors. 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.[71]

Noting the Western perspective, the author outlines John MacAloon's four criteria for spectacle:[72] (1) Visual sensory and symbolic codes are primary, (2) The event is grand and monumental, (3) Spectacle engenders excitement in the audience through its heightened dynamism, (4) It institutionalizes separate roles between audience and performer, thereby establishing a distance between them.[73] Drewal recognizes that Yoruba improvisatory performances meets these criteria save for the separate roles between audience and performer.[74] Unlike Western viewing conventions which position the audience as distanced observers,[75] there is no division between spectator and spectacle in Yoruba performance; both viewer and performers possess a knowledge of the improvisation at play in performance. Art historian Patrick McNaughton confirms Drewal's observations 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.[76]

On the other hand, Western observers who lack the cultural knowledge necessary for participation are often unaware of the improvisation that takes place in African

performances. Drewal suggests that this is in part responsible for the dearth of writing on the subject.[77]

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 of 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 American postmodern idiom.[78] 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.[79]

Drewal also speaks to the interconnectedness of dance 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 their specific tradition by observing and participating in ritual events.[80] Additionally, although Drewal uses the term "spontaneously" to describe the creation of music and movement in performance, it is evident that a detailed understanding of these forms is necessary before one can improvise. In fact, many scholars aside from Drewal utilize the term "spontaneous" to describe the of-the-moment composition of embellishments[81] that take place in African dance and the music on which it relies. Temporally, the word works to highlight the moment-to-moment decision-making of the performer; however, one cannot ignore the skill-set behind each decision. Throughout this research, 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-set. However, to speak of an improvised dancer's spontaneity to 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.

Furthermore, because rhythm is integral to the Africanist conception of improvisation, it is important to discuss the role of music. 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."[82] 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 and experimenting with innovation. Rhythm is integral to the relation between dancer and musician, and improvisation then becomes a conversation among participating parties. Moreover, in the aforementioned essay, Drewal also 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."[83] A Yoruban dancer "catches" external rhythms that are so internalized by training that it's almost as if they originate from within.

Speaking within the context of the National Ballet of Senegal, a coastal West African country, dance scholar Francesca Castaldi expands upon the idea that rhythm is

inherent in Africanist understandings of improvisation.[84] Specifically, she speaks to the polyrhythmic nature of African dance.[85] In her work, *Choreographies of African Identities*, the author 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.[86]

Here, Castaldi posits that the polyrhythms lend themselves 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, to 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 yet possess the necessary skills to improvise. Additionally, dancers and drummers, as "masters of their own traditions" contribute to the ever-evolving nature of tradition.[87]

As a final note, Castaldi speaks to the issue of ownership that I touched upon in the previous section. Polyrhythms lend themselves to a circular logic that resists an absolute point of origin.[88] As I will discuss, this Africanist philosophy contradicts Western conceptions of improvisation. In the latter, ownership permeates 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.

Regarding improvisation from a musical standpoint, ethnomusicologist Paul F. Berliner analyzes the mbira[89] traditions of the Shona[90] people of Zimbabwe, a landlocked country in southern Africa. Echoing previous scholars, Berliner confirms that improvisation is part of performance, and it relies upon both the knowledge and skill of the musician as well as the character of a given piece.[91] 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."[92] And because there is no prescribed order in which to play variations, no two musical events are identical.[93] Thus, not only do we begin to get a sense of the parameters in which improvisation takes place, but we begin to see the ways in which skilled artists innovate within the structures of tradition.

Furthermore, as a result of the merging of cultures in the United States, the continuity of improvisation can be found in the diasporic forms of jazz, tap, and hip-hop, among others. Improvisation is so prominent in jazz music that it becomes a way of life for many artists as they venture to establish their own voice within the tradition. In jazz, several recurring themes surface: Innovation-within-tradition, and the necessity of deep knowledge of tradition 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."[94] He also extends improvisation past the individual to a group experience in his discussion of improvisation within a jazz band: "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."[95] Coincidently, the concept of an "improv jam," associated with Contact Improvisation, is taken from jazz "jam sessions" in which jazz musicians come together to create and explore through improvisation.[96] This is yet another example of how a dominant culture has the power of propagation while the nondominant culture often becomes lost.

In her essay, "Tap Dance: Manifestation of the African Aesthetic," dance scholar Cheryl Willis 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.[97] Dancers work within the vocabulary and rhythmic style of tap but have the agency 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, a direct reflection of African influence. As Danielle Goldman elaborates upon in the introduction of *I Want to be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, when one relegates the innovation that exists within traditional forms to thoughtless, spontaneous acts, one disregards the skill-set that is necessary to perform such acts. Additionally, not only does Goldman problematize the word "freedom" and its associations with improvisation, but she 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 non-violent protest, among others. Thus,

through Goldman's work we can begin to understand both the complexities and the circulation of influences that inform different understandings of dance improvisation.

Moving forward, African-American vernacular dance, which encompasses a wide range of social dance traditions dating from the plantation-era to twentieth century hip-hop, also adheres to the Africanist aesthetic of improvisation. Reinforcing a direct link between traditional and diasporic African forms, Jonathan David Jackson asserts that a thorough knowledge of tradition is necessary in order to begin improvising within a given form.[98] Moreover, much like jazz and tap, where improvisation largely determines the structure of a performance, "in African-American vernacular dancing, improvisation *is* choreography."[99] While Western 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. Additionally, Jackson reaffirms the "inseparability between sound and movement" in African-American vernacular forms which is yet another clear reflection of African traditions.[100]

In his analysis of African-American vernacular dancing, Jackson also posits two interrelated symbolic fields that are useful in uncovering the purpose of improvisation within these vernacular contexts: "Individuation" and "ritualization."[101] Individuation constitutes the dancer's negotiation of his or her personal style, inviting the viewer to witness his or her assertion of physical prowess and inventiveness, and promoting the evolution of tradition.[102] 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 at a ritual event.[103] 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.[104] Participants perform physical displays of prowess attempting to prove themselves through inventive, challenging moves in order to gain status within the community. One can relate the freestyling artist's desire to create an individual style, and the jazz improviser's life pursuit for a unique artistic voice, to Jackson's premise of individuation as outlined above. It is from this competition with oneself and others that innovation arises. Once again, improvisation is assumed to be partly responsible for the evolution of these traditions both across time and through interaction with other cultures.

Through the aforementioned scholarship, one can begin to see the aesthetic and philosophical underpinnings of improvisation in Africanist contexts. Much has been said about the defining characteristics of African dance.[105] However, as I have outlined, much of the writing on improvisation in African dance forms is intertextual, buried within texts that focus on African music and dances of the African diaspora in the United States. Despite these limitations, one can begin to see the participatory, inclusive nature that connects dancer, musician, and spectator, along with the structured innovation, that defines improvisation as an Africanist aesthetic. Now that I have established a framework through

which we can understand improvisation as an Africanist aesthetic, I turn to improvisation in an American postmodern context.

Downtown Dance of the 1960s-70s

While much has been written about New York City's Downtown Dance of the 1960s-70s, several scholars have significantly contributed to detailed historical accounts of improvisation in this era.[106] Notably, the Downtown Dance era, marked by a desire for creative freedom, arrived at the backend of the Jazz era, and as I will outline, jazz influences permeate the work of many artists of this period.[107] Additionally, the white artists of this era on which much of the existing literature on this subject focuses, found this sense of "creative freedom" in dances of the African diaspora.[108] With this in mind, I will trace the lineage of this era of dance practices—which are largely defined by cultural borrowing—as I begin to uncover the aesthetic and philosophical characteristics of improvisation in the American postmodern context. In doing so, I will illuminate the limited scope of much of the existing writing on American postmodern dance which tends to focus on the white European Americans of the Judson Dance Theater and its successors. Although an in-depth historical account of this era is outside of the scope of this research, it is necessary to provide context for the postmodern improvisational practices of which I speak. First, I turn to dance scholar Sally Banes to provide a general definition of postmodern dance in the United States.

In her book, *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Postmodern Dance*, Sally Banes tackles the complexities of the term "postmodern" and its relation to dance practices in the United

States. The author posits that the term was first utilized in a chronological sense to denote the generations of artists who succeeded the early-to-mid twentieth century foray into modern dance.[109] Broadly defined, American modern dance is a Western theatrical dance form which encompasses a range of personal styles and idioms that came about in reaction to the strictures of classical ballet. Where modern dance artists played with "gravity," "dissonance," and "a potent horizontality" of the body, those who called themselves postmodern artists rejected musicality, meaning, characterization, mood, and atmosphere.[110] Drawing on art theory, Banes clarifies that neither the modern or postmodern eras of dance fully align with the principles of the modernism and postmodernism artistic philosophies.[111] In fact, according to Banes, postmodern dance adheres to characteristics of both philosophies. Moreover, Banes argues that the term "postmodern," despite its complexities, can be used to describe the avant-garde art of the sixties, seventies, and eighties. That said, I delimit the scope of my research to focus on the sixties and seventies as these decades are the focus of the majority of writing on postmodern improvisation.

Although Banes provides a foundation from which we can speak about postmodern dance, her study possesses a limited scope. The author restricts her discussion to ten choreographers, all of whom are white European Americans, and all of whom are associated with either the Judson Dance Theater of the 1960s or the Grand Union of the 1970s: Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown, David Gordon, Deborah Hay, Lucinda Childs, Meredith Monk, Kenneth King, and Douglas Dunn. Moreover, dance scholars Susan Manning[112] and Ramsay Burt[113] have criticized Banes's

work. Manning argues that Banes is "attributing to only one generation of 20th century choreographers a set of formal concerns shared by other generations as well" thus universalizing the work of a few key choreographers.[114] Similarly, Burt finds error in Banes's periodization and characterization of what is considered as modernist versus postmodernist.[115] Despite these critiques, Banes's work in developing a detailed overview of American postmodern dance has been highly influential. Specifically, Banes has been credited with providing the first comprehensive account of the work of the Judson Dance Theater.[116]

Founded by a group of students enrolled in Robert Dunn's composition class, The Judson Dance Theater was a collective of artists who performed at the Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village, Manhattan from 1962 until 1964.[117] Known for his experimental approach to composition, Robert Dunn was an accompanist for Merce Cunningham. As a choreographer whose work differed radically from the modern dance in which he trained, Cunningham's work is defined by an abstraction of music from movement; his movement aesthetic can be described as a melding of balletic postures of the body and expressive articulations of the spine, drawing inspiration from Martha Graham and her contemporaries.[118] It is important to note that American concert dance has been defined by a series of avant-gardes. As Banes reminded us, "Each generation called for a new set of subjects, a new dance technique, a new relationship to musical, literary, visual, and theatrical arts."[119] Thus, the work of Cunningham, and later, the Judson Dance Theater, falls on this historical continuum of rebelling against existing norms in the realm of dance performance.

Both Dunn and Cunningham worked with musician, John Cage, and the avant-garde explorations of these three artists contributed to the postmodern dance era with which I am concerned.[120] And as Banes suggests,

> The experiments and adventures of the Judson Dance Theater and its offshoots laid a groundwork for a postmodern aesthetic that expanded and often challenged the range of purpose, materials, motivations, structures, and styles in dance.[121]

Thus, the work of the Judson Dance Theater gave way to future experimental dance endeavors such as the Grand Union, a dance collective which focused on improvisational performances lasting from 1970-1976,[122] and Contact Improvisation, an improvisational form developed by Steve Paxton in the early 1970s defined by "taking weight, lifting, carrying, leading, following, wrestling, and partnering in myriad ways."[123] Although I merely skim the surface of the work of the Judson Dance Theater and its successors, I aim to provide context for the postmodern improvisational practices of which I speak in this study.

Racialized Experiences of the Avant-Garde

Before I continue, what of the African American artists who have been written out of the aforementioned historical accounts of the avant-garde dance of the sixties and seventies? Although she only dedicates several paragraphs to the matter, Banes discusses the racialized nature of avant-garde dance, specifically improvisation, during this period. According to Banes, although the avant-garde dance improvisers in the sixties and seventies were predominantly white, they were heavily influenced by the African American aesthetics of jazz.[124] At the same time, Banes states that "the African American

vanguard in dance took an entirely different direction from the predominately white avant-garde, so that both venues and audiences for the two worlds separated."[125] She goes on to say that although African American artists such as Dianne McIntyre were utilizing improvisation in their work during this time, "postmodern dance was seen by many African Americans as dry formalism, while African American dance was considered by white postmodernists as too emotional and overexplicit politically."[126] Once again, we see a "whitenizing" of black culture to please European American ideals.[127] Thus, although white avant-garde artists borrowed African-derived traditions of jazz, they transformed certain facets of the culture, such as emotion and politics, that disagreed with their own agendas.

Dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild has significantly contributed to the uncovering of African American influences on predominantly European American dance forms.[128] In her chapter titled, "Barefoot and Hot, Sneakered and Cool: Africanist Subtexts in Modern and Postmodern Dance," Gottschild draws connections between Africanist and Europeanist dance forms, illuminating not only the circulation of cultures, but the phenomena of cultural appropriation, in the United States. Filling in the gaps of scholars who have written about American postmodern dance, Gottschild summarizes several key qualities of postmodern dance that are derived from Africanist principles:

> The coolness, relaxation, looseness, and laid-back energy; the radical juxtaposition of ostensibly contrary elements; the irony and double entendre of verbal and physical gesture; the dialogic relationship between performer and audience—all are integral elements in Africanist arts and lifestyle that are woven into the fabric of our society. Postmodern dance, like other postmodern trends, has a keynote the quoting of styles from past eras.[129]

Evidently there are parallels between postmodernist and Africanist dance idioms, yet Gottschild argues that it is naive to assume that this is a coincidence as many scholars have.[130] And, although a detailed account of Asian influences on postmodern improvisation in the United States is beyond the scope of this research, Gottschild clarifies that "chroniclers of postmodern performance have...credited Asian sources in Zen and other Buddhist philosophies, yoga and other Hindu practices, and in the martial arts," yet "they have not given credence to the Africanist aesthetic as a pervasive subtext in postmodern performance."[131] Gottschild has largely contributed to giving credit where credit is due. Speaking from personal experience, Gottschild reveals the Africanist presence in the work of postmodern artists such as Deborah Hay, Meredith Monk, and Simone Forti. Specifically, she mentions that the Africanist aesthetic of participatory performance can be found in the "fluid concept of audience-performer interaction" that defined the aforementioned artists' work.

Finally, Gottschild briefly mentions the work of African American postmodern artists such as Blondell Cummings, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Bill T. Jones, Bebe Miller, Donald Byrd, and David Rousseve. Although, as Banes clarifies, these artists did not begin working in avant-garde venues until the eighties and nineties,[132] their contributions to postmodern aesthetics and philosophies cannot be ignored. Gottschild underscores the fact that these artists preserve Africanisms in their particular postmodern styles. Her key argument is that Africanist characteristics define the African American culture that is the legacy of all Americans.[133]

To continue, in her book, *Dances that Describe Themselves: The Improvised Choreography of Richard Bull*, dance scholar, Susan Foster, expands upon Gottschild's ideas. Speaking to the racialized experience of dance during this era, Foster focuses on the jazz influences in the work of white postmodern artists such as Richard Bull.[134] Where Banes simply mentions the presence of jazz influences in postmodern dance,[135] Foster provides concrete examples to support her statements. Regarding Trisha Brown's notion of structured improvisation in performance, Foster writes:

> Brown identifies the use of limitations or structures in improvisation as that which enables the performer to find or invent new material, and she references jazz as a practice that stipulates structural limits in order to discover the new.[136]

Here, Foster illuminates an Africanist aesthetic embedded in jazz and translated into the work of postmodern artists such as Trisha Brown: Innovation within structure. In doing so, she indicates that structure was not absent from the improvisatory work of postmodern artists; as I will expand upon, at the same time that they were experimenting with new ways of moving, postmodern artists were working within their own set of structures and individual aesthetics. Such aesthetics resulted from each artist's background and training. Additionally, Foster adds that postmodern artists were drawn to "jazz's ability to promote and support individual innovation at the same time that it cultivates group cohesiveness."[137] Here, the author illuminates yet another Africanist aesthetic—that of individuation within the context of the group—that influenced the work of postmodern artists.

In accordance with Gottschild, Foster exposes several of Thompson's canons in the work of white artists, namely "the aesthetic of the cool" and "apartness."[138] Moreover, Foster argues that although the popularity of jazz spawned alliances across races that fueled

the Civil Rights movement of this period, it is fallacious to consider that jazz-derived dance improvisation served a common social or aesthetic agenda.[139] She explains that white artists, as products of a culture that condemned improvisation and valued choreography, were part of a movement against established norms. On the other hand, African Americans, who had been improvising far before jazz became popular, had to work to gain recognition in the realm of Western concert dance.[140] Thus, improvisation signified differently across racial borders. As Foster explains:

> Improvisation, a luxury neither African-American nor Asian American artists could afford, given their limited and hard-won access to the stage, thus remained a predominately white approach to performance, except in more protected environments where, for example, black artists could perform for black audiences.[141]

Ironically, although improvisation was not historically valued in Western European concert dance, white artists were privileged with the ability to improvise on stage without question.[142] Indeed, the postmodern aesthetic can be considered "an aesthetic of privilege, the privilege of not having to worry about if the audience understands what you're doing or not."[143] In a system of racial oppression, white artists were able to indulge in staged improvised performance while African American artists, along with their improvisational practices, were marginalized.[144] As Brenda Dixon Gottschild explains in her book, *The Black Dancing Body*, when black traditions—such as the phenomenon of improvisation in jazz—became assimilated into white culture, its creators were systematically excluded.[145] In more detail she writes:

> Given the politics of racism, it is predictable that the powers-that-be attempt, against all odds, to stricture this exchange into a one-way street. The "high" is sanctioned to borrow from the "low," whites from blacks, ballet from folk dance, and so forth. When the exchange goes in the reverse direction, a condescending, patriarchal tone of ownership prevails.[146]

Here, the racial power relations that are embedded in American culture become evident. Because I have only begun to uncover the contributions of African Americans artists working in the avant-garde, I recognize that much more work, and an entirely separate study, is necessary in order to do these artists justice. With that in mind, I now turn to literature specifically on postmodern improvisational practices to capture an understanding of the philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings of this idiom.

A Postmodern Approach to Improvisation

As I have begun to describe, the use of improvisation was highly associated with the experimental choreographic approaches of the Judson Dance Theater and its successors.[147] As several scholars have stated, improvisation in Western concert dance contexts has historically been used as a compositional tool for choreography.[148] Indeed, in a culture that valued set choreography, improvisation was part of the process but not part of the finished product.[149] In her book, *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston*, dance scholar, Anthea Kraut, elaborates upon the value systems that surround the notions of "choreography" and the "choreographer."[150] Kraut argues that the term "choreographer" assigns credit to an individual for a given dance production, thus serving as an assertion of authorship.[151] Additionally, laden with hierarchical values, the term implies skill, preparation, and labor, whereas improvisation implies a lack thereof.[152]

Although she is speaking within the context of author Zora Neale Hurston's contributions to the field of dance, Kraut highlights a binary that is central to the postmodern dance experience: The drive to go against established norms and improvise.[153] Indeed, set choreography was so ingrained in the culture of Western concert dance that artists, such as Yvonne Rainer of the Grand Union, had to grant dancers *permission* to improvise blocks of material in performance.[154]

According to dance scholar Susan Foster, Richard Bull's work, *The Dance That Describes Itself*, attempts to complicate the notion of authorship. The premise of the piece is that dancers must cooperate by way of an improvised performance in order to unveil the dance moment-to-moment. Foster writes:

> *The Dance That Describes Itself* divests choreographer and dancers of [their] traditional roles, asking them instead to participate collectively in a process of helping The Dance to create itself. Admittedly, Bull was placed in an authorial role by both dancers and viewers, yet the premise of the dance creating itself destabilized his leadership and called into question the kind of authority he might exert. Performed at a critical distance from traditional concert dance, this unwieldy aggregate of bodies…kept authorship in circulation among all participants. And this sense of participation in the creation of the work extended to viewers as well…they became involved in tracking the dancers through the process of choreographing the performance.[155]

Notably, as I have outlined in previous sections, whereas participation is a key component of improvisation in Africanist contexts, it is considered experimental and unconventional in a Western dance context. Additionally, in African dance contexts, authorship is always acknowledged within the framework of the larger participatory event that includes musicians, dancers, and spectators.[156] That said, Foster provides an example of a postmodern artist who resists traditional authorial roles in his improvisatory work by creating a sense of community that was common in postmodern dance work.[157]

To continue, both in her book, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*, and in her essay, "Spontaneous Combustion: Notes on Improvisation from the Sixties to the Nineties,"[158] Banes outlines the role of improvisation in the context of Western concert dance. In addition to being utilized as a tool to generate material for performance, as well as a training tool used in offstage practice or preparation, improvisation has been used as a shifting component of set, choreographed performances.[159] Banes describes the elements of surprise and ephemerality in improvisational performances that drew many artists to this type of work.[160] In her words, improvisation is dance which is "created for the moment and instantaneously disappears" which contributed to the excitement associated with the form.[161] Additionally, Banes speaks of improvisation as "a way of engaging the deep, untapped creative resources of each person."[162]

Indeed, much of the writing on postmodern improvisation includes a discussion of accessing the "authentic" self. In the dance improvisation reader, *Taken by Surprise*, from which I have sourced several key essays for this study, several dance scholars, including Banes, hone in on "authenticity" as a goal of improvisation. In her essay, "Anna Halprin and Improvisation as Child's Play: A Search for Informed Innocence," dance scholar Janice Ross articulates authenticity as a search for "innate, unmediated responses and behaviors" in order to foster the "tastes, inclinations, and movement distinctions of each individual."[163] There is an element of tapping into a latent potential and of finding new, fresh, distinctive ways of moving. Similarly, in her essay, "The Writing on the Wall: Reading Improvisation in Flamenco and Postmodern Dance," dance scholar Michelle Heffner Hayes associates "authenticity" with "innate" or "natural" ability. At the same time, Hayes is aware that such

notions are at odds with the training and skill that is necessary to improvise.[164] Later on in the essay, Hayes explains that improvisation is valued as "the most authentic and the least contrived kind of dancing," simply because it happens in the moment and is then "immediately, and joyfully, lost."[165] She argues that it is because of its unrepeatability that improvisation gains a sense of authenticity.

To continue, aside from the search for authenticity, Sally Banes speaks to the desire of postmodern artists to move away from virtuosic technique and to expose audiences to the inner-workings of the dance. She writes:

> Whether the prevailing structure is a mathematical system for using space, time, or the body; or arbitrary assemblage; or fragmentation, juxtaposition, the deliberate avoidance of structure by improvisation; or the constant shifting of structures by chance methods, there is always the possibility in modern dance, that the underlying form will be bared. The anti-illusionist stance dictates that seams can show, and that part of the aesthetic pleasure in watching the dance derives from learning its structure by examining the seams: watching mistakes occur in improvisation, witnessing fatigue, danger, awkwardness, difficulty; watching movement being marked and learned. Watching systems being built and dismantled. Refusing to be seduced by mere skill.[166]

Here, Banes alludes to a number of philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings of postmodern improvisation. Several scholars have established the experimental nature of postmodern improvisation.[167] In this passage, Banes provides several examples of *how* and *with what* artist were experimenting. She speaks of various structures that enabled artists to explore new ways of moving, however, artists could choose to ignore these structures all together. For instance, artists began rejecting the temporal structures of musical accompaniment in favor of "actual time," or the time it would to complete an action take off-stage. Additionally, much like Richard Bull's goal in *The Dance That Describes Itself*,

artists desired to demystify dance by acknowledging its process of being made.[168] In these postmodern contexts, the good, the bad, and the ugly of dance were all welcomed on stage.

In her book, *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*, anthropologist and dancer Cynthia Novack discusses and contextualizes Contact Improvisation from an ethnographic standpoint. She clarifies that practitioners of Contact Improvisation, a movement form developed in 1972 by modern dancer Steve Paxton, were "for the most part young, college-educated, white, middle-class Americans living in transient, communal settings."[169] And although Novack considers Contact Improvisation as a communal movement experience, she is aware of the European American tradition of separating art from other aspects of life. Novack argues that this subculture of artists sought to challenge this particular cultural norm, attempting to blur the boundaries between life and art.[170] However, whereas in Africanist contexts art exists as an integral part of life, in postmodern contexts, artists attempted to reconcile the two by bringing quotidienne life into art. Thus, casual, everyday movements—anything from walking, to combing one's hair, to eating—became fodder for movement explorations.[171]

Speaking of Contact Improvisation's origins and influences, Novack also confirms that in Western concert dance forms improvisation was a tool for choreography and not part of the finished product itself.[172] Echoing the sentiments of Banes, Novack explains that postmodern artists concerned themselves with making the choreographic process visible, thus shifting existing relationships between performer and audience. Additionally, artists such as Anna Halprin often created scores—a set of rules or guidelines around which an improvisation is structured—that involved audience participation. According to

Novack, postmodern artists utilized improvisation as a tool "to generate movement outside of traditional dance techniques," thus improvisation became "a way for expanding range of movement, rather than confining it to a codified vocabulary."[173]

Several scholars, including Novack and Banes, mention the work of Margaret H'Doubler who created the first dance major at the University of Wisconsin in 1926. In this program and others, improvisation became the method for teaching creative, educational dance.[174] H'Doubler's emphasis on kinesiology and anatomy would later influence postmodern artists such as Anna Halprin, contributing to the focus on bodily awareness and sensation in many postmodern understandings of improvisation.[175] With this knowledge, one can to begin to see the persisting legacies and influences of improvisation taught in American universities.

In his book, *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces*, dance historian, Ramsay Burt, reaffirms many of the aforementioned ideas. Focusing solely on white avant-garde artists in the United States and Europe, he confirms that artists of the Judson Dance Theater and its successors were constantly attempting to break down the barriers that exist between life and art in the United States.[176] Additionally, he restates several of the aforementioned purposes for improvising, namely improvisation as a training tool for dancers, as a means for developing innovative dance, and for finding and elaborating new types of movement material.[177] Burt also speaks of shifting audience-performer relationships, noting that "improvisation made the spectator aware of what might be called the performer's body intelligence."[178] Indeed, much of Burt's work details the anatomical awareness, somatic knowledge, and sensitivity to movement qualities at the heart of the work of Judson Dance

Theater that later influenced other improvisational practices including Contact Improvisation. As a final note, Burt explores the impacts of American postmodern dance on experimental dance in Europe, mentioning the work of artists such as Pina Bausch, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, and Jérôme Bel. Although this work is outside the scope of this research, it is worth noting the extent to which Judson Dance Theater has influenced other practices and vice versa.

Furthermore, Banes, Foster, and Novack have all posited that the white improvisational practices of the sixties and seventies are a product of specific historical moments. According to these authors, changes in improvisational approaches both revealed and commented upon transitional moments in American history.[179] For instance, as Novack explains, the temporary economic expansion of the sixties allowed for experimentation and opened possibilities for dance artists.[180] Banes confirms that improvisation embodied values of "freedom, abundance, and community" in response to the sense of economic ease that permeated the lives of the white middle-class artists of which she speaks.[181] In her earlier work, *Democracy's Body*, Banes expands upon the economical and political environment of the sixties that gave rise to the Judson Dance Theater and its successors:

> The country's postwar mood of pragmatism was reflected in the various arts…The economy was expanding, and the new Kennedy administration stressed youth, art, and culture. There were few grants for individual dancers, but there was a spirit of willing participation and an interest in using inexpensive materials; one could live cheaply and make art cheaply.[182]

Although in this particular instance Banes does not take into consideration the complexities of class and race that privilege the art-making of white, middle-class bodies, she touches upon several factors that have influenced the dance-making of this era: Rather than concert

halls, artists were drawn to informal, inexpensive settings such as churches and loft spaces.[183] Additionally, as I mentioned earlier, artists moved away from individual authorship towards the spirit of the collective.[184] Additionally, speaking specifically of Contact Improvisation, Banes mentions recurring themes of playfulness, freedom, spontaneity, authenticity, and community. She also mentions that as Contact Improvisation spread in the late seventies, it became associated with counterculture trends including gender equality.[185] Indeed, both Banes and Novack discuss the shifting gender roles at work in Contact Improvisation; against the Western tradition of ballet wherein men lift women, in Contact Improvisation men could lift men, women could lift women, women could lift men.[186] Once again, although I only briefly touch upon the economic and political climate that supported the experimentations of postmodern artists of this period, I aim to provide context for the voices of Philadelphia-based artists who have been influenced by this era of dance-making.

In this section, I have provided only a brief overview of the aesthetic and philosophical components of postmodern approaches to improvisation. Sourcing the work of scholars in the field of dance studies, I have touched upon several important ideas that inform my research. Namely, the literature on improvisation as a postmodern practice is not limited to, but tends to focus upon, the contributions of white, middle-class artists. Such understandings of improvisation are not only influenced by the socioeconomic environment of the sixties and seventies, but also arise from Margaret H'Doubler's work developing the first dance major at the University of Wisconsin. As I have begun to uncover through the work of Sally Banes, Ramsay Burt, Susan Leigh Foster, Cynthia Novack and

others, a postmodern approach to improvisation is, in part, defined by experimentation with structure, a rejection of virtuosity, and a draw toward the quotidienne—both in action and in an attempt to marry everyday life and art. Further, postmodern artists utilize improvisation to explore somatic awareness, sensation, and group dynamics, attempting to involve the audience in the process of creation. As a final note, similar to my overview of improvisation as an Africanist aesthetic, I do not wish to essentialize the range of work during this era. However, I find it useful to expose various overarching characteristics that I can reference in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE: LET THE ARTISTS SPEAK

Engaging the Voices of Philadelphia-Based Dance Improvisers

Before moving forward, it is necessary to provide a brief biography of each artist that I have interviewed. As I stated in the introductory chapter, Olivier Tarpaga, Zakiya Cornish, and Cachet Ivey were chosen because of their experience with dance in Africanist contexts, and Esther Baker-Tarpaga, Marion Ramirez, and Molly Shanahan were chosen because of their work within what I am deeming an American postmodern context. That said, this section will begin to illuminate the immense amount of overlap across contexts. In order to situate their work, each artist was asked to provide an overview of their background as a dancer, whatever they felt was the most pertinent information. The following section outlines each artist's response to this question; the variances in length between subsections are a reflection of the amount of detail provided by each artist based on individual interpretations of the question.

Olivier Tarpaga

Sunday May 1, 2016

Olivier Tarpaga is a Burkinabe dance artist in his thirties who is currently situated in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. On a rainy Sunday morning, I sit down with Tarpaga at his home in South Philly that he shares with his wife, Esther Baker-Tarpaga, and their daughter. He brings two steaming mugs of ginger tea to his dining table, and we settle in to begin.

Co-founder of Baker & Tarpaga Dance Project (BTDP), a transnational, project-based company invested in socially-engaged work, Olivier Tarpaga classifies his work as contemporary dance theater. Tarpaga speaks of attending events as a child—traditional ceremonies, weddings, family gatherings—as well as witnessing his father's band rehearse in his family compound. Although he started dancing at an early age in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, it was not until 1994 that he began dancing professionally at the Maison de Peuple with Le Bourgeon du Burkina, a youth company devoted to music, dance, theater, and storytelling. Tarpaga speaks of the lasting influences that his involvement in the company has had on his work:

> From there my dance just bloomed and came to something else. That's why I use a lot of physical theater in my work. And because music pushed me into dance, for someone who knows my work, they know I don't play around with music! So now you see how it follows you around from your beginning. That's how it started.[187]

Here Tarpaga alludes to his relationship with music and the fact that he takes it very seriously in his choreography. Additionally, he recognizes that his training in theater, music, and dance have all contributed to his current artistic approach.

Furthermore, it was at Le Bourgeon du Burkina that Tarpaga began working with Salia Sanou, a contemporary Burkinabe choreographer who is active in both Burkina Faso and France. Speaking of his work with Salia Sanou, Tarpaga notes:

> That's how my contemporary dance started…he came with a new way of doing things, a new way of dancing. [Along with] making traditional stuff, he made a lot of contemporary things which was really weird and funky for us at first.[188]

Tarpaga also credits Salia Sanou's dance partner, Seydou Boro, a Burkinabe actor, dancer, and musician, and David Rousseve, a choreographer who is currently based in Los

Angeles, as mentors in his career. According to Tarpaga, he can see the influences of these artists in the way he makes work, in his relationship to music, and even in his approach to teaching. In later sections, I will elaborate upon Tarpaga's choreographic approach as well as his understanding of improvisation.

Esther Baker-Tarpaga

Wednesday May 11, 2016

Esther Baker-Tarpaga is a white woman in her early forties whose work revolves around undoing racism. On a warm Wednesday afternoon, she greets me at the door of her home with a hug and a smile. Windows cracked, letting in a pleasant breeze, she leads me to her sofa where we curl up and begin the interview.

Currently based in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Esther Baker-Tarpaga is the co-founder of Baker & Tarpaga Dance Project (BTDP). Baker-Tarpaga grew up in Fort Collins, Colorado where she began dancing at a young age. Her early training consisted of ballet, modern, gymnastics, and later, hip-hop, in a studio setting, and she notes that all of her teachers at the time were white women. While Baker-Tarpaga continued to dance throughout high school and college, she recalls the formative experience of traveling to Senegal in 1995:

> I lived with a family [who] had parties all the time…and all the people from the neighborhood came and paid a little bit, and we would dance. For me, it was a revelation; it was really cool for me as a dancer—all of a sudden I was in a country, or culture, that appreciated movement in a different way than what I grew up with. It was more "interwoven in the fabric of everyday life." And I think that deeply impacted me—[the] aspect of Africanist culture, of the family, of learning within a social context. And it was nonhierarchical—I mean there were better dancers than others, but it was like grandma could dance, or you could dance with a little kid. Everybody was dancing. I feel like I learned a lot—it opened up another world for me which had a deep impact, and currently still exists in my work.[189]

Here, Baker-Tarpaga reaffirms what several scholars have described as a blurring of boundaries between life and art in many African cultures.[190] In addition to Senegal, she outlines several other informative experiences including time spent in Australia, Korea, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

In San Francisco, Baker-Tarpaga trained extensively in Contact Improvisation. Additionally, she studied with artists who were involved with Sara Shelton Mann's performance group, Contraband, such as Keith Hennessey and Kathleen Hermesdorf. During her time in graduate school at UCLA[191], Baker-Tarpaga continued to study West African dance and was also influenced by artists such as David Rousseve, Victoria Marks, d. Sabela Grimes, and Eiko and Koma. While all of these artists have made an impact on her choreographic process and pedagogical approach, Baker-Tarpaga considers California-based performance artist and activist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who has contributed to her work as a performance artist, as her current mentor.

Indeed, according to Baker-Tarpaga, in 2010 performance art came to the forefront of her artistic work. She describes her relationship with performance art as follows:

> Performance art is very…I'm gonna use the word improvisation, but it's like a mindfulness of the moment, and making strong choices within the moment, and deep listening inside. I feel like that applies to all the kinds of movement I'm doing now…All my movement now is just improvised; it's the stuff on my body, but it's from multiple influences. And then of course we have the digital…every digital thing is absorbed into me in maybe a different way, and then I re-interpret it. Or the people I'm moving with...and then being a parent for sure—like my body birthing a child, things change. My knee injury, working alongside Olivier Tarpaga, my husband, and seeing the way he moves...there are different things that circulate and influence.[192]

Inside of her experience with performance art is an understanding of the layers of influences that drive her work. As I will elaborate upon, it is nearly impossible to attempt to categorize the work of such artists who embody a diverse range of practices and genres.

Marion Ramirez

Friday May 13, 2016

Born in Puerto Rico, Marion Ramirez is a woman in her thirties who is currently situated in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. On an overcast Friday morning, I meet her at Manakeesh Cafe in West Philly. We order hot tea and spend a while catching up in cozy, leather armchairs before beginning the interview.

A dancer, educator, and choreographer, Marion Ramirez is actively involved in Philadelphia's dance scene. She began dancing in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and among many styles, her early training included pantomime, ballet, and Flamenco. Working with Puerto Rican artists such as Myrna Renaud, Ramirez recalls participating in classes which combined African and Afro-Caribbean dance forms with Puerto Rican styles of dance. She describes Renaud's class as follows:

> All her classes had live percussion, which was always very interesting. And she was very interested in entering this trance-like state through the movement—but not necessarily improvisational all the time. It was very technical with the use of the body, and the work with the floor—the sound of the floor. And that was interesting for me because then I was making connections between the Flamenco training and the work I was doing with her…especially the rhythmic stuff.[193]

Drawn to its rhythmicity, Ramirez began touring with Flamenco companies on the island. She describes Flamenco as a challenging and empowering experience which allowed her to grow as both a dancer and a woman:

> It was very challenging, but I loved the challenges of learning all those rhythms…My hands were playing one rhythm while my feet were playing a different rhythm…It was an amazing motivation for me to get it and be so precise, and also to participate in the improvisatory part of Flamenco.[194]

Here, Ramirez describes the polyrhythmic, improvisatory nature of Flamenco that resonates with Africanist movement forms.[195]

Aside from Flamenco, Ramirez was introduced to the postmodern aesthetic through the festival Rompeforma in Puerto Rico, organized by choreographers Viveca Vázquez and Merián Soto. Years later, after training at the Laban Conservatory in London, Ramirez moved to New York City where she continued to dance with Merián Soto and began training in Contact Improvisation at the Center for Movement Research. Reflecting upon her identity as a Puerto Rican woman living in the United States, Marion pondered the following questions:

> Where am I inside of all this training? The training—because I've done it nonstop since I'm three—has also become who I am. So where I am, and who I am, beyond the movement that I've learned? That's where improvisation is like, "Let's find out!"[196]

Ramirez raises several important points that I will explore in later sections: Her motivation for improvising, and the extent to which her training has influenced her understanding of

improvisation. Working alongside Merián Soto, Ramirez was able to begin to reconcile the diverse set of influences that have informed her training. She speaks specifically of her relationship with American postmodern and Puerto Rican aesthetics:

> A form that is coming from mainly white Americans who have different needs from what Puerto Ricans may have, we can adopt that form and learn a lot from it. But culturally, [postmodern artists] have a need to go "against expression," or do something that is about nothing, or it's just about the action. As Puerto Ricans we have so much more to say…There's been so many years, so much history, of being stepped on, being suppressed, oppressed…How do you take it back, and own it with pride, and still be able to be a postmodern artist—without having to try to be a white American from the sixties in New York? I learned a lot from Merián and this group of people that I mentioned before who were deeply invested in…doing really awesome postmodern work that has to do with the Puerto Rican experience.[197]

Ramirez reaffirms a philosophical characteristic of postmodern dance: The extraction of theatrical elements from dance, and the prioritization of the actions of the body over expressive movement.[198] She also reveals a set of circumstances that have brought her to her current understanding of dance improvisation, which I will cover in the next section.

Molly Shanahan

Friday May 20, 2016

Originally from Ohio, Molly Shanahan is a white, middle-aged woman who is currently living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, although she actively makes and presents work in other cities across the nation. On a sunny Friday morning, I travel to High Point Cafe in Mt. Airy to meet her. We order iced coffee and settle in amongst the bustling cafe atmosphere to begin.

Artistic Director of Molly Shanahan/ Mad Shak, a Chicago-based dance company founded in 1994, Molly Shanahan is currently pursuing doctoral studies at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Although she attended ballet and gymnastics classes as a small child, it was not until high school that Shanahan began to seriously pursue dance classes alongside cheerleading. Her experiences in high school inspired her to continue studying dance, first at Denison University with a Bachelor of Arts in Dance and English, and then at The Ohio State University with a Master of Arts in Dance Composition. Additionally, she considers dance scholars Gill Miller and Karen Bond as highly influential mentors in her career.

According to Shanahan, the majority of her early informative dance training was "within the realm of concert dance as it's taught in higher education" with an emphasis on African or "African-infused jazz" courses.[199] Reflecting upon her time at Denison University, she mentions that the dance program has since replaced all of their ballet classes with West African dance classes. She notes:

> I'm very proud to be affiliated with that institution…Basically with the position that many styles and forms can be the backbone of good dance training, or the basis, foundation of good dance training, not just ballet. So I love that.[200]

Once again, it becomes evident that it is impossible to strictly categorize or define the boundaries of the work of any of these artists. And as I will expand upon, Shanahan does not define herself or her work inside of a particular genre. Furthermore, her response points to the hierarchical nature of dance in academia that still tends to value Europeanist forms over other dance forms.[201] Denison University is an example of a university attempting to redefine the existing set of values.

Zakiya Cornish

Monday May 23, 2016

Zakiya Cornish is an African American woman in her thirties who currently resides in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. On a bright Monday morning, I meet her at the Barnes and Noble Cafe on Temple University's main campus. After a brief greeting, we take a sip of our drinks and begin the interview.

Originally from New Orleans, Louisiana, Zakiya Cornish is a dancer, educator, and choreographer who is active in the Philadelphia dance scene. At the age of six, Cornish began dancing with a children's West African dance company, working with artists such as Mariama Curry and Abdoulaye "Papa" Camara. She attended Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts in Dallas, Texas where she was introduced to ballet and modern dance techniques. Cornish elaborates upon her additional dance training as follows:

> I started to venture out into Afro-Cuban styles of dance. I had the pleasure of studying Brazilian dance when I was working with a company called Casa Samba—I may have a done a performance or two with them but…it was more study-based.[202]

And although she has also studied ballet and modern dance, along with Afro-Cuban and Brazilian dance genres, African dance forms have been a consistent part of Cornish's training. Speaking of her current aesthetic, Cornish explains:

> Now my movement practice is pretty much consistent of, I would say, diasporic movement from Africa, and again, the Caribbean. And through my MFA at Temple I have been introduced to postmodern, ballet again, as well as modern; so now my style kind of incorporates a plethora of experiences.[203]

The complex layering of aesthetics that inform Cornish's movement reflects the circulation of ideas and cultures in a globalized world.[204]

Cachet Ivey

Tuesday May 24, 2016

Born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Cachet Ivey is an African American woman in her thirties who is known for her dance classes held at the Community Education Center and elsewhere. On a balmy Tuesday afternoon, I head to the Barnes and Noble Cafe once again to meet her. We spend a few minutes becoming acquainted before diving in to the interview.

A dancer, educator, and choreographer, Cachet Ivey actively performs and teaches a range of African dance forms in the Philadelphia community. As a child, Ivey began dancing at the Freedom Theatre in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, learning what she calls "the usuals," or ballet, jazz, and tap.[205] It was not until her father took her to see a performance at Villanova University that she decided to pursue training in myriad forms of African dance. Ivey began taking classes at the Community Education Center in West Philly with the Ibeji Performing Arts Company, working with Philadelphia-based artists such as Jeannine Osayande. In our interview, Ivey is open and honest about her early experience of learning African dance in a classroom setting:

> My father was a percussionist, so I always would hear it, but I had never gone to a class. We would go to other community events—different ceremonial things where it wasn't a structured class; people were just kind of dancing. But when I had to do specific movement that went with the drum, it was awkward for me. So it took me a long time to get acquainted with it, but once I started doing it…it's like a magnet—the drum's like a magnet.[206]

Here, Ivey emphasizes the fact that such dance forms are learned techniques, not natural phenomena that simply manifest themselves in the African American body, as is often assumed.[207] She asserts that training is an ongoing process, and that there is always more to learn. Speaking of her teachers who have been influential in her career, she explains:

> The thing with this vast genre [is] if you really want to dig deep into it, you never stop studying. So, I see these people—of course with social media—wherever they are in the world. I can hit them up any time…so it's an ongoing thing with them. And they're the type of people who welcome that. They have, I'm sure, thousands of students all over the place, and it's funny because of course they're great at their craft, but also just as people. They have the type of personality that's very welcoming, very approachable…They are just so welcoming; they treat you like you're their children.[208]

In later sections, I touch upon the community environment—familial even—that Ivey has established in her classes, echoing the sentiments of many of her mentors. She mentions several specific individuals, such as Youssouf Kambassa and Dorothy Wilkie, who continue to provide guidance in her life. Ivey reflects on her formative experiences that have shaped her current relationship with dance:

> So, now, fast forward: Any dance that has to do with the drum being connected to it—which usually connects to the African diaspora—I'm attracted to all of that. So, I've been able to *really* study with some *really* great teachers—people who are at the top of their style. Because as you know, with African dance, you're talking about thousands of different styles. When you say "African," it's very general, ya know, it's so vast. It's super vast, and complicated...so I've been lucky to study with the people who are top-notch.[209]

Not only is she aware of past influences that resonate within her present body, but she draws attention to her connection with the drum which I further explore in later sections. Additionally, she reaffirms an important point: The danger of generalization inside of terms such as “African” or “Africanist.”[210] As Ivey reminds us, we cannot ignore the immense diversity of genres that exist within the continent and its vast Diaspora.

Let the Artists Speak: Defining Dance Improvisation

Now that I have briefly introduced the voices who have contributed to this study, I turn to the element in which I am most interested: Dance improvisation. Once I established a sense of who each artist is, I asked each individual their definition of dance improvisation, and how they approach dance improvisation. I also asked in what ways improvisation is part of their work. In this section, I unpack their responses to these questions, and begin to grasp the range of understandings and approaches that exist across these six Philadelphia-based artists.

Olivier Tarpaga

My interview with Olivier Tarpaga revealed two strong influences on his understanding of improvisation in dance. He begins by walking through examples of improvisation used in performance:

> In my festival, Nomad Express, we have what we call the Mentor and Mentees Night, which is an improvised concert...What happens is we have to find a way to tune our instruments together—when I say tune, tune our bodies and everything together. If we sit down and plan every second of what we're going to do, then it's not improvisation anymore. But we still have to have a plan—improvisation can still have a structure and a plan...In my own work I have parts…that are always improvised. Everything. Every single piece. Some choreographers will say that's a bad idea; some will say why? Because I want to feel refreshed everyday.[211]

Although Tarpaga begins by defining improvisation within his work as a contemporary choreographer, he continues by explaining his experience as a musician who works with traditional African rhythms:

> Improvisation is when ideas "pop" with the momentum—when things happen right at the spot. Because also as a musician, I know how it is playing drums, where [during] the solos I don't think—it just happens [in a] second, and then you go there...So I define improvisation as an art that goes with the moment, and that follows the moment. And also it's an art that could have structure.[212]

In each instance, he defines improvisation within a structure. This is reminiscent of the innovation-within-structure that scholars such as Tiérou[213] and Berliner[214] speak of in African or African-derived forms. It also echoes the sentiments of scholars such as Banes[215] and Foster,[216] who speak of the various structures and improvisational scores explored by postmodern artists. Additionally, he mentions the moment-to-moment decision making that has been mentioned in the review of literature by scholars in both contexts.[217]

When asked to describe his approach to improvisation, Tarpaga turned once again to his experience with West African drumming. Within this discussion, he calls attention to the conversation between dancer and musician, and the inner-workings of traditional, improvised solos:

> You absolutely have a structure; you have to know the rhythm. You have to know not just the accompaniment, but the traditional solos...So what happens is, between solos there's stuff that happens...and you have to also understand that many of the traditional solos were designed for dance steps; they were designed based on movement—not all of them, but many of them…When you're playing for dance, it's also the best place for you to do the best solos…you want the step to inform the way you create the solo, but then you want your solo to make the step exciting…You don't just play for each other, you inspire and push each other. Then, [when] you're looking at the step…you [might not] know where the dancer is going, so that's when your solos come in the momentum—it "pops" there in the moment…That's why in my tradition, we say there is no dance without music; there is no music without dance—they're all one body…That also informs why, although I'm a modern dance choreographer, I always have live music.[218]

Tarpaga emphasizes the structure inside of traditional West African rhythms as well as the connection between music and dance.[219] He also reiterates that although he works within the "modern" realm of dance, his background in traditional West African music and dance have had lasting impressions on his work.

Esther Baker-Tarpaga

To continue, my interview with Esther Baker-Tarpaga also revealed an overlap of postmodern and Africanist contexts in her work. Her initial response to how she defines dance improvisation is as follows:

> It's something about deep listening, in the moment…spontaneity. It's definitely something about listening. Listening, and you may choose to move or not...Deep body listening to the environment, and responding to the environment and the people with you. Going with. Going against. Resisting. Sharing. Something like that.[220]

Here, Baker-Tarpaga echoes the sentiments of scholars such as Novack and Banes who speak of a strong awareness of the body and a deep listening.[221] Once again, we are presented with an emphasis on moment-to-moment decision making.[222] Interestingly,

Baker-Tarpaga uses the term “spontaneity.” As I have previously argued, whereas “spontaneous” connotes a sense of unpremeditated behavior that disregards a dancer’s training and skill-set, “spontaneity” recognizes the dancer’s mastery of impulse and moment-to-moment decision making. Moreover, her approach to improvisation involves the same deep listening, both internal and external:

> Listening, and seeing how I can complete an idea. I think in group improvisation, it’s like where I can interject ideas. It’s listening and watching—when I say listening, I mean like bodily “seeing” ...I’m really listening a lot to my gut.[223]

In a group improvisation, not only does Baker-Tarpaga possess a sense of her external environment, but she maintains an inner awareness that guides her choices.[224] Along with her definition and approach, Baker-Tarpaga explains the use of improvisation in her work as a performance artist and choreographer:

> Personally in my own performance work all of it [is improvised]. With performance art, it’s following the sensation within the moment...really deep listening all the time and making choices, but there are certain codified movements…So there are set gestures but it’s not always a specific, exact, boom. So I feel that there’s improvisation within that, that there’s space to breathe within…I feel like the newer the project, the more improvisation because I’m still researching. The longer I do a project...there’s certain things that become a little more set…but actually in all my work, there is improvisation within, as well as set movement.[225]

Several themes arise including decision making in the moment, as well as space to breathe within set movement. Additionally, Baker-Tarpaga alludes to improvisation as movement research, or a choreographic tool, a concept that will resurface in several other interviews.[226]

Marion Ramirez

Much of Ramirez's experience is defined by a search for who she is as an individual inside of her dance training. Her definition of improvisation reflects this process of self-discovery:

> Dance improvisation, I feel, gives you an opportunity to learn about yourself. It's a practice that can allow you to see who you have become through your cultural training, through your social training, and yet [it] opens windows for you to see who are you beyond that and with that.[227]

Her definition brings up an important concept which will continue to surface: Improvisation as a practice. She mentions several instances in which she practices improvisation as an educator and choreographer. Ramirez describes how she prepares to teach a technique class in a university setting:

> The way I prepare is I go to the studio, and I lay down on the floor. I do some breathing, and then start improvising and see what wants to be there. After an open improvisation of a long period of time, I identify a few things that interested me and…build a phrase from that…Now let me decode that to make a warm-up that facilitates this kind of effort, the use of this or that.[228]

Here, improvisation is a tool for movement phrase-building.[229] Much like Baker-Tarpaga, Ramirez alludes to an internal listening as she breathes and sees "what wants to be there."[230] In her choreographic work, she speaks of her connection to music as she works with musicians to devise a score:

> In choreography…if I work with musicians, sometimes we just have open improvisations at first to identify: How do we connect? Or I listen in stillness for a while to what they bring, they observe in silence, and we find places of connection. And then we devise a score...so with improvisation there's different kinds of score-making and there's endless ways in which you can build scores.[231]

Ramirez mentions several key concepts. The first is relating to the musicians; she collaborates alongside musicians to develop a score. I interpret Ramirez's use of "score"

both as a musical composition which accompanies her movement, and as the set of rules or guidelines around which an improvisation is structured.[232] Additionally, I note that in Africanist contexts, improvisation happens alongside the musicians in a live, participatory performance.[233] In Ramirez's discussion, although she may use live musicians in a performance, she speaks of a separate rehearsal process in which improvisation is used as a compositional tool.[234]

Molly Shanahan

Furthermore, although she does not associate herself with a specific understanding of improvisation, Molly Shanahan's definition of dance improvisation is as follows:

> I would probably define it on a continuum because I think really, in some ways it's happening all the time, ya know, pervading everything; sometimes I look at it that way. And then, I think that I would also define it as an intentional craft that can be practiced...as an awareness of accidents that produce something interesting. And I guess I would also define it as like a state of mind, or a perspective on movement and performance, going on all the time.[235]

Shanahan raises several important philosophical points: Improvisation as an intentional craft, or practice, and improvisation as an awareness, or state of mind. She describes in more detail this state of mind below:

> There's a thin, but totally navigate-able line, between planning and checking out. I feel like I approach that simply by looking for that line and trying to kind of nudge myself back to it when I've fallen to one side or the other…Let me come back into this place that kind of has porous boundaries but also a clear direction to it...One of the terminologies that gets used a lot—and I used it—is that you're gonna "get back to something." But if I really think about a metaphor it would be that you reconnect with something that's moving forward—it's not going back.[236]

For Shanahan, improvisation is continuously moving forward. It involves a negotiation of not over-planning while also staying present in the moment. She speaks of this mindful negotiation in her work as an educator:

> I feel like my teaching is a big practice of improvisation. I don't know, maybe twenty years ago, I stopped preparing classes…So, every time I teach, I'm improvising everything about it: The creation of the material; what comes when. It's very responsive to who's in the room, what's going on, what's going on with me, what I observe in the students...what could be a productive area to work with? So that's like a major area of practicing improvisation where I suppose, I almost never feel like, ya know, I need to "go improvise" because it's already such a huge part of what I do.[237]

It is evident that for Shanahan, a strong attention to the present moment is necessary so that she can build her improvised classes accordingly. This mindfulness carries into her choreographic work:

> Some of my work is really rigorously composed and involves a lot of "set" choreography, and some involves improvisation in a particular context. And then some of my work, like an evening length solo that I do, is live-composed; it's spontaneously composed. The whole thing. From start to finish. And, so I guess it's really just started to feel like it's part of everything, it's in everything. Even if I'm doing something that I really know very, very well that the minute I'm not improvising, it's kind of deadened. So if I shift out of—I've never really put this into words—but if I shift out of that state, that improvisational state, then I'm doing it mindlessly. So I guess maybe improvisation is a state of mindfulness for me.[238]

Here Shanahan solidifies several key concepts: Improvisation as a state of mind, a state of mindfulness, and improvisation as a continual practice. She describes her approach to her live-composed solo below:

> Just doing it. When I originally developed the project, I spent a lot of time…kind of dissecting or excavating my tendencies…the shift from not doing it to doing it, like literally in the moment in the studio. When does it start? What signifies the beginning? Is it time? Is it space? Is it a particular action? So I was really asking, at maybe almost a cellular level, when do I start this thing that I'm calling a performance? So that's one question. Another one was, patterns that comprise composition will happen, unless I make a concerted effort for them not to happen—and that would be much, much, much harder than letting them happen. In other words, the harder thing would be complete randomness. It would be almost impossible.[239]

Here, we begin to see the inner-workings of improvisation as a compositional tool during a live performance. Shanahan understands that improvisation, even during a performance, is not "complete randomness."[240] Instead, there are tendencies and patterns to sift through in order to compose in-the-moment.

Zakiya Cornish

As I mentioned, Cornish works predominantly within a West African context. Her interpretation of improvisation is as follows:

> I would say improvisation in dance—just sort of a general concept—is that it is a space to allow your body to create, remember, or reproduce movement.[241]

Here, Cornish alludes to the bodily knowledge of which I spoke in the introductory chapter; the body can create, remember, and reproduce movement, and improvisation is a space to explore these capabilities. She speaks in more detail about her experience with improvisation below:

> At the end of [a West African] class or in social settings you would have something called a bantaba.[242] It's really interesting because myself and some other dancers who have studied West African dance for a really long time, talk about the space of the bantaba, and how [for] us growing up, it was sort of a confined improvisational space. So there would be an African rhythm that's played, and you can go out there and do movements. But those movements had to correlate with the specific rhythm that was played. So if they're playing Manjani,[243] you have to do Manjani steps, but then you could improvise inside of the sort of confined space. Now, I see that it's a lot more fluid—from when I was younger—it's a little bit more fluid; that people are throwing their different influences into those spaces.[244]

Cornish's discussion of "a confined improvisational space"[245] inside of the bantaba echoes the notion of innovation-within-structure that defines improvisation as an Africanist aesthetic.[246] She elaborates upon what she means by the increased sense of fluidity inside of these confined spaces:

> As I started to get outside of New Orleans, and started to travel and see other instructors, I started to see where style plays a part. So yes there is a technique to the movement—yes your foot has to hit at that particular part in the rhythm, and your arm has to sway this way, but then there's this thing about how do you want your arm to sway? Do you want it to be a very sassy sort of sway or do you want it very strong? So then you start to see really stylized movement. Where I began to play with improvisation, in those particular genres of West African dance, was using style. I think now West African dance is in a shifting space, that as a whole, is starting to allow more room for improvisation; mixing of styles, mixing of rhythms, of dances, making it a more fluid space.[247]

According to Cornish, stylization, or individuation,[248] and improvisation go hand in hand. Additionally, due in part to globalization and the transmission of ideas across cultures, traditions do not remain static but evolve and shift.[249] I probe her for more detail about how improvisation takes place inside of these ever-evolving traditions:

> A very good example would be Sabar, a dance out of Senegal. It definitely has, I would say, stronger improvisational skills and spaces. So, there are very specific moves that you would do, but then everything else is ad-libbed. And that's one of the beautiful things about Sabar, is that it's constantly evolving; it's constantly changing. So that's one of the spaces where, like I said, you have this really big space to improvise because, I feel like most of the time in West African dance, in certain styles, that the drummers sort of lead you. You follow what they're playing, you go where they go. Whereas [with] Sabar, it's pretty much them following you where you go! Ya know, you do this movement and they have to be really in-tune to what you're doing so that the music can follow what you're doing.[250]

Once again, tradition is constantly evolving and changing.[251] Additionally, Cornish underscores the dialogue between dancer and musician.[252] Similar to Tarpaga, she also mentions the idea of becoming "in-tune" with other participants, in this case the drummer with the dancer. Finally, Cornish speaks of her approach to improvisation:

> I would say in my personal practice, just sort of allowing the negotiation of that space to just kind of happen as far as allowing the embodied movement that wants to come out, come out. I allow my space to use different influences—Senegalese dance, dance from Ivory Coast, from Guinea, Brazilian dance, Afro-Cuban, social dances—and just sort of allowing that to unfold in whatever way my body wants that to unfold…How do I allow these movements to sort of transform based off of where I am—mentally, spiritually, emotionally—right now? And so I think that is sort of my approach. It has become so innate that I haven't given it much thought.[253]

Much like her definition of improvisation as a space to create, remember, or reproduce, Cornish's approach involves allowing her movement to unfold and transform in each moment. She takes a similar approach with her students:

> As far as teaching: Allowing the students to input into the choreography. Me giving them a movement and then watching how they, I would say, recreate that movement—because I'm not working with pre-professional dancers, dancers that have a background in dance. So, me showing them a move, and then me thinking as a teacher like "That's not what I did…but it's ok!" Okay, they're connecting to *that*, so let's see where that goes; allowing that sort of free flow of movement to happen.[254]

Once again, Cornish mentions an allowance; an unfolding, free flow of movement. Reminiscent of Marion Ramirez, Cornish attempts to negotiate a variety of influences in her improvisation:

> As I grew older, I started to try to find myself inside of this technique I was given. I was like, okay I'm very grateful for this ethnic group doing this dance for this reason, but I have no real connection to [those purposes]. Where do I find myself? How do I put myself into this movement technique that I've been given? Because the cultural context is very different. So I think that is sort of where the beginning of my improvisational practice started. It was like, okay how do I connect to this movement, and what are the ways this movement resonates with my life, my practice, my culture?[255]

Once again, the complex layering of influences on each artist's dance training and understanding of improvisation becomes evident.

Cachet Ivey

Similar to Zakiya Cornish, Cachet Ivey works within a predominantly West African context. She defines improvisation as an important part of African dance that often gets overlooked inside of class contexts:

> Sometimes we have to remember that a lot of [African dance] is coming from a ceremonial realm and then, to present it on stage or in a class setting, some of those things are changed a bit because a lot of these ceremonies are not for everyone to see…You have an artistic license that has been taken with a lot of these things so that you can present it to the world on stage, and also teach it to people in a class setting. So sometimes, the improvisational part—which is a big part of this—takes a back seat because we get into the very technical. So I try my best in my classes to balance that.[256]

Ivey elaborates upon how she maintains a balance between technique and improvisation inside of her classes:

> Sometimes at the end of class we'll make a circle, and people go into the circle and dance. Now, with this situation you have the drummer and the dancer, and it should be this really close connection with the two. So the drummer, especially the person who's playing the lead djembe, can pretty much go wherever they want to go in the timing, in the cadence of the rhythm, because they have this orchestra behind them that is holding down that basic rhythm. Now the dancer and that lead drummer should be able to communicate so that any move that I make, the drum is gonna accent that movement. So that improv thing is such a strong element because if I jump up in the air, barrel turn, and my elbow goes to the right, the drummer is gonna play all of that—he doesn't know what I'm going to do, but we have this connection.[257]

Not only does she reassert the strong connection between dancer and drummer, but she clarifies the rhythmic dialogue that occurs between musicians.[258] She also touches upon the connection amongst dancers and the protocol for entering and exiting the circle:

> There is a protocol that goes with [the bantaba] because everyone can't just go in together, right? And you shouldn't stay too long, and [your solo] shouldn't be too short. And then, you leave and someone else comes in. There are a lot of people who are very good, like they're very good at the technique, the movement, but when it comes to [the bantaba] they're like, "No, I don't wanna do that." Because like I said, it's a very close and intimate thing—it's just you and the drummers basically, and everyone else on the outskirts. The improv factor is important, but like I said, we get used to the set choreography.[259]

Once again, she is speaking inside of a classroom context. Moreover, Ivey echoes the sentiments of Zakiya Cornish when she talks about individual style:

> I definitely love watching people improv because it's like a fingerprint: No two people's improv is going to be the same. Ever. So that is a cool thing. Now another thing, the teachers I told you about, Youssouf Koumbassa for instance, his style is very distinct to him. He's from Guinea; he does Guinean dance, but he has a unique style inside of that genre. So it's funny because, if I go to a conference, usually at the end they have a circle. When I watch people, I can always tell who his students are because of the style.[260]

Learning from teachers who have developed their own styles has influenced Ivey's approach to improvisation:

> I always say you want to put your stamp on it. So if you can take all of this stuff that you learn from all these people and mix it up, but also put your stamp on it, you've arrived…Putting your stamp on this movement definitely is a direct connection to things that you see and hear, going through everyday, wherever your journey takes you. And it's different for everyone—that's what makes this improv thing like a fingerprint because people don't have the same experiences. They're never identical.[261]

According to Ivey, individual experiences and influences meld to create an improvisational fingerprint that is unique to each dancer. She elaborates upon her experience with improvisation:

> I would say that being able to express any movement that I think illustrates the sound that I'm hearing…You have to literally be able to process it in your body, and mentally of course, to be able to illustrate the music with your dancing. For me, when I hear music I can see movement with it. I don't care what kind of music it is; I can see people in my mind moving to this music…To me, improv is: The music is gonna dictate what I'm going to do. So I don't do a like set choreography, none of that. I just dance. Which, like I keep saying, it's hard! Because a lot of times we want to be in control of everything. No. You have to relinquish. I always tell people; the drum is dictating what you're doing.[262]

She speaks of relinquishing control to the power of the drum; the drum dictates her movement when she improvises.[263] I ask her to dig deeper into this idea of relinquishing control:

> These [dances] have so many functions: Ceremonial setting, class settings, staged performance settings, and then we have this social setting: These parties happen and the drummers will come, and they'll play, and people will just get up and dance…But it's hard to relinquish that control, ya know? You have to have some type of foundation—knowledge of the music definitely. If you're dancing to live music, you're not just a dancer. You have to be a musician too...maybe you don't necessarily play actively all the time, but you can differentiate the different parts that you're hearing and which instrument it's coming from. We're talking about a full orchestra; all the drums are not playing the same part, so you have to have some type of awareness of who's playing what.[264]

Thus, I interpret Ivey's use of "relinquishing control" as letting go of control over planning, and allowing the music to guide your decision making. However, as Ivey explains, a knowledge of the layers of rhythm is necessary in order to allow the music to motivate your movement.[265]

Let the Artists Speak: Learning to Improvise

Now that I have begun to illuminate the range of understandings and approaches to improvisation that exist among these six artists, I clarify where each artist feels that they learned to improvise. As I will elaborate upon, the "where" and "how" of learning to improvise within a dance context is largely dependent on the context in which the artists situate themselves. Additionally, as I will clarify in the next section, it is also largely influenced by each artist's sociocultural background. Now, I let the artists speak.

Olivier Tarpaga

Tarpaga mentions that his first experience of improvisation in contemporary dance was working with choreographer Salia Sanou. He describes an instance of how he was taught below:

> He would come to rehearsal, and we would learn movements and do some company rehearsal...Then he would guide us and say "Let me have you pretend you're a dog. How do you walk like a dog? How do you act like a dog?" That's when we started going places…It was crazy and funny, and we were young, and overexcited, and overdoing things. It took time to understand [the intricacies of becoming a dog] and all of that takes you to places and it becomes something…So that's how it started with him: Simple things like animals…But today if you tell me to act like a dog, it's going to be an amazingly beautiful thing that I'm excited to do...it takes you to different levels and dynamics…When we were young and excited, we just wanted to do everything—we were overdoing things. We're probably still overdoing stuff but, ya know, trying to calm down.[266]

Once again, although Tarpaga is a drummer and dancer of traditional West African dance forms, he turns to his contemporary dance experiences when defining improvisation. Thus, he recognizes that improvisation is a large part of drumming and dancing, which go hand in hand in traditional African dance genres, however, as a contemporary choreographer, his understandings of improvisation reflect that realm of movement. As a final note, he says:

> The good thing with improvising is it gives you a lot of space...a lot of places to breathe, to do stuff with no pressure...The best things can happen, even the simplest...So when I improv, I have a lot of space to breathe, to walk, to dance, to talk, to laugh, to do all kinds of things, to experiment and not think too much.[267]

For Tarpaga, improvisation is a space of experimentation and exploration, reflective of his time learning from Salia Sanou.

Esther Baker-Tarpaga

Baker-Tarpaga recalls the first time she actually put a label on the practice of creating-movement-in-the-moment:

> I think the first time I heard the word improvisation was probably after college. It was definitely in Australia when I was there in '97 or '98. I started doing Body-Mind Centering[268] with this women Alice Cummins. It was really cool—the internal awareness. And then we started doing Contact-ish things; it wasn't specifically called Contact Improvisation but it just happened...I got really into it this improvisational thing. I'm not so into learning phrase work except for West African dance, so improvisation is my jam…So official wording of improvisation was that. That was post college because in Senegal I learned to improvise too, but they don't call it that—there wasn't a word, there was just dancing. People don't say "improvise," but I was doing the same thing in Senegal before I went on to learn the codification of the word in the Contact Improv context…I must have free danced around when I was a little kid too—but I'm calling it free dance I didn't call it improv just then—so I definitely was massively improvising in Senegal, but it wasn't called that word. It was just dancing; it was very codified but it had a lot of room to do your own interpretation.[269]

In her response, Baker-Tarpaga raises several important points. First, there is a direct link between the internal awareness of Body-Mind Centering and her current work as described in previous sections. Additionally, echoing anthropologist Margaret Thompson Drewal's sentiments, Baker-Tarpaga mentions that in Senegal there was room for interpretation within codified steps; however, it was not given the label "improvisation."[270] Similarly, as a child, Baker-Tarpaga may have "free danced," but it was not labeled as "improvisation." As I have explained, in the United States, the term itself is largely associated with the compositional practices of the Judson Dance Theater and its successors.[271] Baker-Tarpaga's response calls attention to the word as a label that is far from universal.

Marion Ramirez

Ramirez responds within the context of the European pantomime in which she trained in San Juan, Puerto Rico:

> I can say that some of my very, very satisfying memories as a kid are waking up Saturday and Sunday morning before everybody wakes up in the house...and in silence, I would set myself a score to improvise for a period of time. I was very young. We were doing it in class, so it just made total sense to me. It was a pantomime exercise, but some of our teachers were taking us on a little bit of an abstract route: It wasn't about acting it out, it was about trying to experience it. How do I show the space that I'm in? How heavy is the blanket that I'm wearing? How heavy is the glass that I'm about to take? Do I see it? Do I want it? All of these things were the questions that my teachers would ask me. So I would create, animate the space in my own imagination, and do it—kids do this all the time; kids improvise all the time. In creative movement we would do improvisation too; they would set up a story, and you do it with your body. Or I would just put on music and improvise to the music, and just amuse myself with what came up.[272]

Like Baker-Tarpaga, Ramirez muses about improvising as a child. However, her childhood experiences include dance improvisation both inside and outside of structured activities. She speaks of using her imagination to embody everyday actions or stories, as well as simply amusing herself as she danced to music. Additionally, Ramirez clarifies that her pantomime teachers specifically used the word "improvisation."[273] Thus, for her, the term improvisation was part of her dance training from an early age.

Molly Shanahan

Although she admits that several undergraduate teachers introduced her to dance improvisation as a concept, Shanahan takes a more internal approach to describing where she learned to improvise:

> Well, it's a really obvious answer because I mean, for me, there's only one person or place where you can learn to improvise and it's yourself…and that's not to say that I haven't had teachers that have influenced me in terms of learning improvisation. But I think you only know you're improvising when you do it yourself—only you can know you're improvising, in terms of that state of mind. And then I think learning how to walk that line between checking out and over-strategizing, I think you can only learn that for yourself through doing it. I don't think that it can come through skill-building, though I do think building skills is fun and can be important. Yeah. I will say though that a couple of undergraduate teachers introduced me to dance improvisation.[274]

She reiterates that improvisation is a state of mind, one that can only be accessed by individuals though practice. For Shanahan, while skill-building in a classroom can be important, the real learning comes from the doing.

Zakiya Cornish

Cornish speaks of the cultural setting in which she learned to improvise through observation and participation:

> I would say that it wasn't a specific person, but the overall cultural setting; the cultural setting of West African dance itself. These circles would happen at birthday parties, at weddings, any type of social event, even it was just to hang out. People would pull out drums and they would start dancing; people would just go in and out of that space. Just being an observer as a child, and then being encouraged to go into the space. Having this community that sort of supports you and cheers you on while you're in the space definitely lends itself to learning how to improvise.[275]

Echoing the sentiments of scholars such as anthropologist Margaret Thompson Drewal, Cornish highlights the communal, participatory nature of African dance forms that allows for learning to take place.[276] She also speaks of her experience growing up in New Orleans, Louisiana:

> Being so close to Second Line music and the brass bands, all of that is totally based in improvisation. A little bit about Second Line—just sort of what it is now—is that brass bands will take to the streets, and it's almost like a parade where they're playing their instruments down the street, and there are certain people who are associated with the brass bands who will dance with them. It is definitely a community feel where people will come out of their houses; people will gather just to parade with the brass bands. The dancing is completely improvisational; it is whatever they're feeling at the moment, however they're connecting to the music that's being played. And again they would dance on streets, on cars, on roofs, on you name it, and you're watching this. And so being a part of that New Orleans culture definitely, definitely plays a part in terms of improvisation.[277]

In her discussion of New Orleans Second Line parades,[278] Cornish speaks of both a community environment, and of connecting to music through movement. It becomes clear how these influences meld to inform her current approach to improvisation.

Cachet Ivey

Ivey turns directly to music as the source for learning how to improvise:

> The music! Having knowledge of these rhythms is the key. There are so many components to these rhythms; you have multiple parts being played at one time. So, studying the music for a dancer—I don't care what kind of style of dance you're doing—whatever music you're using, you have to dig deep into that. That's the only way you'll be able to improvise. That's just my opinion. Especially live musicians.[279]

She stresses the importance of having knowledge of music as a dancer, underscoring the connection between dance and drum in African dance genres.[280] Ivey expands upon the importance of establishing a connection with the musicians who are so integral to the dances she teaches:

> Usually with these classes, it's the same people who come to play, so I like to make sure people know the names of the drummers, because sometimes there's a disconnect. Almost like you're dancing to recorded music—sometimes that happens. So I always reiterate "Hey guys, you know when you're dancing, you can look at them. You don't have to look over here and over there, you can look at them. This is who they are, these are their names." You have a connection to these people so you don't feel like you're dancing in front of these strangers…so at least know their names![281]

Not only is she imparting to her students the importance of this connection, but she is establishing a community environment inside of her classes.[282]

Let the Artists Speak: Sociocultural Influences

In my discussion of where each artist learned to improvise, I began to touch upon how their backgrounds influence their current understandings of dance improvisation. In this section, I delve into each artist's specific understanding of how their sociocultural backgrounds influence their perceptions of improvisation. Each artist interpreted the question differently, and I honor the range of responses to this question below:

Olivier Tarpaga

Tarpaga reiterates that his diverse training in music, dance, and theater has greatly contributed to his current work. He summarizes his background below:

> Again, improvising is a space for me to breathe and not think too much...to go to places. I describe my work as contemporary dance theater because of my background in acting; I love physical theater, and vocalizing, things that I say, and the music. Everything I do informs my way of moving on stage… I use musicality, I sing the movement, I make sounds, I talk with my movement. So yes, my background informs a lot the way I improvise because of music, because of theater, because of dance. And also my mentors inform the way I do things…It's not just an inspiration; it's not a copy; it's an information.[283]

He also recognizes that his mentors have informed both his movement and approach to improvisation.

Esther Baker-Tarpaga

In her response, Baker-Tarpaga delves into her work as an anti-racist dance activist:

> White privilege is really big…I'm middle class, I grew up middle class. I know all of this has informed me...I think that certain things really affect my work with undoing racism. Violence within the body and the anger I have, I put into my body. I'll want to feel some sort of tension or pain to undo the trauma—like I have to go through some trauma in my body to put myself into a position of white power…or put myself into an enslaved body, or put myself into the physicality of being tied up—having physical limitations and using props to do that. It's like me processing all of my sociocultural baggage as a white woman.[284]

She explicitly states that her sociocultural position as a white woman in America has contributed to her desire to work through racial politics in improvised performances. Baker-Tarpaga also speaks specifically about her training in West African dance:

> I have a deep influence of West African dance training for more than fifteen years, and it's completely impacted everything…So basically I think for me, as a white body in this country improvising within black forms of dance, there's all these politics of appropriation…the complexities, I'm very aware of that. But I'm also like, my family's African, my daughter's African-American, I'm very informed. I'm a white body majorly informed by Africanist forms, but I'm also majorly informed by white forms or however we're gonna call that…I would really like to think more about how white supremacy is in my movement...it's so easy for me to talk about the Africanist influences, but before Africanist influences...I had non Africanist influences...so it's interesting that I'm not articulating that part very clearly...you're sometimes blind to your own formation.[285]

Her response touches on the complexities of cultural appropriation and racial dynamics in dance.[286] She recognizes that African dance training is an important part of her formation as a dancer. At the same time, she is extremely aware of her position as a white woman who is trained in Africanist forms, and is constantly negotiating this in her work.

Marion Ramirez

Ramirez focuses on her training with Merián Soto as a major turning point in her career:

> In Merián's work I was totally able to bring in everything I knew and really start improvising with it…Let's be ourselves. Who are you? Who are you now? And Merián was really able to guide me in that process. We worked with a music ensemble playing this very traditional Puerto Rican and Cuban music, and brought it into contemporary improvisation...I couldn't do just technique class anymore after that.[287]

Working with Merián Soto, Ramirez was able to begin to reconcile the diverse influences—from pantomime, to Flamenco, to Laban Movement Analysis, to Contact Improvisation—that have impacted her work. Once she began to find her own voice inside of dance improvisation, other techniques lost their appeal.

Molly Shanahan

In her response, Shanahan speaks of the environment in which she was raised:

> Among the many things coming to mind, one of them is that I think that I generally grew up in a milieu where planning, organization, keeping it together, success, achievement, those things were over-prioritized—educationally, in my family. Also appearance—what I now consider to be overly-appearance oriented. Lately I've been thinking about some of the body patterns that I feel that I sort of inherited from, or learned from, some of the women in my family, particularly on my mom's side of the family. They're all patterns of "holding it together," and I catch myself doing them.[288]

Here, Shanahan alludes to movement patterns that were prevalent in her mother's side of the family that became a part of her. Additionally, speaking about one of her musician friends, Andrew Bird, Shanahan talks through how she began to break these patterns:

> I'd go over to his house—we'd be talking about something else, something unrelated—but he'd be kind of plucking things out [on his fiddle] and I just kind of loved how that was part of him—it was just what he did. And I took it to heart because I was like my instrument is my body, and it's with me all the time, and yet I don't think of it with the same freedom that he thinks of his relationship to his fiddle…And at the time I was waiting tables and…we'd be in the back room hanging out…so I decided to use my time in the back room to make a phrase or practice something...I guess it was one step of kind of what I felt to be breaking out of what I would call a sociocultural assumption, that would say "Oh you're waiting tables right now and you're in the back room…you should just be doing nothing" and shifting that to be "I can make up this phrase, and get this ready for rehearsal later." So I think I'm very influenced, and also I feel that I'm in an active relationship with my background.[289]

Thus, not only was she breaking familial patterns, but she was moving outside of sociocultural norms that dictate how one should use her time. In doing so, she became more connected to her dancing body.

Zakiya Cornish

In response to how her sociocultural background has influenced her understanding of improvisation, Cornish turns to her upbringing in New Orleans, Louisiana:

> I would say that growing up in New Orleans and being surrounded by the sort of parading of dance definitely plays a huge part in how I view dance; how it's such an embodied experience—such a freeing experience. And again, it differed so much from the structured environment, and how I was taught [in African dance classes]. So I think that definitely plays a part...I mean even going to different night clubs and different places in New Orleans. I would say a lot of that has to do with the huge influence of live music; that improvisational space that exists in jazz music and live music, and how that definitely has permeated into dance there. So you would go see a band playing, and then people would just break out and start dancing… So I think all of those influences just definitely created the space for this improvisational practice of being able to be fluid.[290]

Here, she alludes to the commingling of influences that have allowed her to become more fluid in her improvisation. In contrast to the more open improvisational spaces of New

Orleans Second Line parades and jazz clubs, recall that Cornish spoke of the "confined improvisational space"[291] of the bantaba. In her response, Cornish reflects on how she has been able to incorporate a range of styles into her current improvisations.

Cachet Ivey

Considering her sociocultural background as an African American, Ivey recalls the stories her grandparents would tell her about their experience with music and dance prior to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States:

> I'll say that my grandparents' influence as far as music and dancing definitely has shaped my interpretation of improv. My grandparents were born in the thirties, so you're talking about pre-Civil Rights. They are in rural Georgia [with] all these challenges. There were only certain places that they could go to engage in music and dancing. And then sometimes you have to go through this area where you were not really wanted—they would take these chances! So if they're taking these chances to go do this thing, then it must be something in this craft that is pulling them so hard that they are willing to take this chances. So the courage that they had to have…To me, those stories that I heard them tell definitely shaped how I value this thing.[292]

Ivey describes the dangers encountered by African Americans in a culture of systemic racism.[293] The utter courage of her grandparents and their will and desire to pursue music and dance have greatly informed Ivey's appreciation for dance and history. Speaking of the stories her grandmother would tell her about the dances of their time, Ivey notes:

> You have this movement that is very, very similar and close to real, traditional African movement because it wasn't that far removed—if you think about how long slavery lasted and when people were brought here, they're not that far removed from that stuff…My grandparents were the first historians that I ever came in contact with. So I think that stuff really shaped how I look at movement that's coming from this African root and how it's traveled. So all of that stuff goes into what comes out when you're just dancing, when you're just improvising.[294]

Once again, Ivey alludes to the evolution and transmission of traditions across global borders.[295] She also considers her grandparents as historians and values her roots as a dancer, which can be seen in her improvisations.

Expanding the Scope: Musings on Dance Improvisation in the United States

The final interview question centers on each artist's individual perception of dance improvisation in the United States. It is important to note that I do not wish to generalize the immense range of improvisational practices that exist in the United States. As I have begun and will continue to illuminate, each artist's understanding and experience with improvisation is entirely specific to their individual set of circumstances. My goal is to begin to apprehend the diverse experiences of artists in order to spark conversations for what constitutes improvisation beyond the well-established work of the Downtown Dance artists of the sixties and seventies. I preceded the question with a disclaimer that I was interested in whatever came to mind based on their individual perception and experience. Thus, while speculations were inevitably made because no one person can speak to the entire American experience, each artist speaks from their own positionality and set of experiences. Once again, the intent of this section is to spark conversations about the range of improvisational approaches in the United States and to expose the broadness of the term itself.

Olivier Tarpaga

In his consideration of dance improvisation in the United States, Tarpaga focuses on his experience with artists based out of UCLA. His response is as follows:

> There's a movement. There's a big movement. Improvisation is big in this country...Like Simone Forti—I know her really well because we were faculty together at UCLA. When I received the CHIME Mentorship Grant, which is Margaret Jenkins Dance Company's grant, from San Francisco, David Rousseve was my mentor for one year, and then Simone Forti was the mentor for a friend of mine...So we were meeting I don't know how many times during the year, and I got even closer to Simone. I saw countless numbers of her work, and I know she's one of the pioneers of improvisation...So it's a big movement, and I have a lot of respect for improv in the US. I think the way I improv and the way we see back home might be a little different. Again, I don't want to be naive here, but improvisation is improvisation. I know the way people use structures here and the way I did when I was younger is different, but at the end of the day we improv, and we try to make beautiful things.[296]

Notably, when asked to speak about dance improvisation in the United States, Tarpaga turns once again to his experience with postmodern artists and contemporary dance as opposed to his work with West African dance and drum; Simone Forti is a postmodern artist who is highly associated with the Judson Dance Theater.[297] That said, he recognizes that while there may be differences between American postmodern and Burkinabe approaches to improvisation, a commonality exists: To make beautiful dance.

Esther Baker-Tarpaga

Moving forward, in response to her understanding of dance improvisation in the United States, Baker-Tarpaga calls attention the broadness of the term:

> Can we call it white dance improvisation, or black dance improvisation, or Native American dance improvisation? There are so many different types of improvisation…I can talk about Steve Paxton and white improvisation—which is actually Asian-influenced—and Nina Martin, Nancy Stark Smith, Simone Forti, all those folks...but that's a very white space. I can't talk so much about the African American history, but I know house dance, stuff that's coming out of the club, like vogue—jazz—I think there's major improvisation in all those spaces. I'm sure some of them were racially mixed spaces, but I think a lot of them were Africanist spaces, black dance spaces, and there was a ton of innovation, improvisation happening there. But often times it was very related to music, versus the white dance spaces of Steve Paxton, maybe they had some abstract kind of music happening, but I think a lot of it was in silence.[298]

Here, Baker-Tarpaga speaks to the racial politics of dance in the United States.[299] She notes that artists associated with the Judson Dance Theater and Contact Improvisation such Paxton, Martin, Stark Smith, and Forti are predominantly, if not entirely, white. On the other hand, improvisational spaces associated with club dance and jazz are predominantly black dance spaces. Interestingly, Baker-Tarpaga notes that music is an integral part of black dance spaces, and often absent from the work of white postmodern artists.[300] Although these are but one artist's musings, as a professional in the field, Baker-Tarpaga possesses a broad knowledge of dance. She exposes a range of dance forms in the United States in her response:

> I think the other forms—just through friends that I'm learning more about—like the Salsa, those spaces are definitely innovation, improvisation. Puerto Rican, Caribbean, all the migrants happening in different parts of the country, coming from Mexico, coming from Latin America, coming from Haiti. There's other forms which are probably very African-influenced too…I've been to a few Native American dance pow-wows, and there's definitely improvisation in the codified steps of certain dances...that's not something I've ever done, just something a friend has talked to me about and I've observed. I'm probably leaving out other things, but I'm just thinking of those three things.[301]

Baker-Tarpaga's response reveals a diverse set of improvisational approaches that are beyond the scope of this research but are nevertheless important in creating a more inclusive account of what constitutes dance in the United States.

Marion Ramirez

In terms of her understanding of dance improvisation in the U.S. at large, Ramirez turns to her early formative experience:

> When I started learning improvisation my teacher gave me *Terpsichore in Sneakers* as my gift, and for me I thought improvisation, in a way, belonged to those people. With Merián years later…I was able to understand, yeah, that is one way of improvising, but improvisation is not *owned* by Richard Bull, Trisha Brown, and Simone Forti, and Steve Paxton. And that has been very empowering...I don't feel that I have to be at the hands of whatever the white postmodern artists said. Ya know, who are they? What do they have to do with my life? How can I take that influence and do something different with it? There's a lot of improvisation that happens in a lot of dance forms that is not the sixties in New York…There's dance improvisation in hip-hop, there's dance improvisation in African dance, there's dance improvisation in Salsa, there's dance improvisation in Flamenco. And they're working within a form. But what elements from those ways of improvising can also have space within dance improvisation that is not only "*Terpsichore in Sneakers*"?[302]

Much like Baker-Tarpaga, Ramirez calls attention to the range of dance forms that utilize improvisation. She speaks of the empowering realization that improvisation is not limited to the work of postmodern artists. Interestingly, she references Sally Banes's *Terpsichore in Sneakers*.[303] I return to my argument that the literature, which tends to focus on white postmodern artists, is partially responsible for the limited understandings of dance improvisation. Once she began working with Merián Soto, she was able to find her own voice inside of such approaches.

Molly Shanahan

In her considerations of what constitutes dance improvisation in the United States at large, Shanahan replies:

> I feel like I sense a surge of curiosity about dance in general, and dance improvisation in particular. I think more and more people, who wouldn't necessarily call themselves dancers or artists, are exploring movement and improvisation…I think the internet has influenced that a little bit in terms of people sharing moments of improvised performance—their own or others'—and that becomes a kind of novelty that feels good to share.[304]

According to Shanahan, the internet is partially responsible for the recent surge in curiosity about dance improvisation because it allows people to share dance, specifically improvised movement. Although an in-depth discussion of the influence of YouTube and other online media is outside of the scope of this research, she raises an important point about ways in which dance is currently disseminated. As a final note, Shanahan, like many of the artists, does not define her understanding of improvisation within a specific context:

> I haven't ever really affiliated myself with what I would call the "improvisation community" of dance in the United States...I think my work is recognized for the ways it uses improvisation, but because I also compose things very closely, I wouldn't call myself an improvisational artist only. Ya know what I mean? Like I would just call myself a dance-maker. So my point is I think there are things going on in that realm of dance in the Unites States that I don't really keep a close watch on.[305]

As I mentioned, no one person can speak to the entirety of dance improvisation in the United States. I simply aim to spark discussions about what might constitute dance improvisation.

Zakiya Cornish

In her considerations of dance improvisation in the United States, Cornish acknowledges that understandings of improvisation change depending on the context. She focuses on social dance versus postmodern dance settings:

> I think that it changes in different spaces. I think social dances—a lot of the current, urban or pop-culture movement—derive from something so small as someone saying, "I'm gonna sneeze," and that sneezing turns into a dance! And that goes viral and everyone's doing it! So I think in those spaces, it's whatever comes and people pick up on and want to experience…I think there are settings, like postmodern settings, that are using improvisation in such a different approach. That is really interesting; such a different space of actually interrogating things—which social dance isn't very much about interrogation. Or like going deeper into a particular aspect of something. So looking at those settings, it's really great to see how the corporeal improv, postmodern take on things is pushing different conversations.[306]

She mentions a philosophical characteristic of postmodern improvisation: Interrogation, or digging deep into a particular aspect of dance. Based on her experience, she notes that this is not often the case in social dance settings.

Cachet Ivey

In her musings on dance improvisation in the United States, Ivey first speaks of improvisation in hip-hop genres:

> So I'll go to hip-hop because that's what [a lot of my friends] do. And I've been to a lot of their battles and parties and things of that nature. I will say that hip-hop dancers as far as improv...some of the best improv that I've ever seen. Definitely. And then you know we're also talking about recorded music, right? But they are able to connect with the drum inside of this recorded music, no matter what it is. So watching them is amazing to me…It always goes back to the drum because if you listen to early house music, the drum is the foundation of it. I mean it's just, you can't get away from it; it's always there. But yeah, definitely hip-hop dances as far as improv.[307]

Ivey draws connections between improvisation in hip-hop and African dance forms, namely the relationship to the music.[308] She contrasts this philosophical approach with the more "abstract realm" of dance in the United States:

> Now I've seen some other things that I just was like...I don't know…I think it's just what floats your boat, or what you connect to. Because I think sometimes people take improv to a level where it's like okay, you're just standing there shaking your hands and stuff. Like, I don't know where to go with that…Now mind you, I know there's an abstract realm, but I think sometimes…it's like alright you just went to this place where really you don't know what this is anymore. That's just my opinion…Like I said, everybody has their own opinion. But sometimes it's just a bit much, that esoteric "I'm in this other dimension" thing.[309]

Ivey recognizes that individuals are drawn toward different understandings of dance improvisation; as she says, "It's just what floats your boat."[310] As an artist working primarily in an Africanist context, Ivey views other improvisational approaches as esoteric, incomprehensible even. Her response supports a call for an inclusive approach to dance improvisation where all voices are honored.

CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

As I have begun to uncover, dance improvisation is an immensely broad term. While at first glance, it may seem as though dance improvisation is none other than artistic spontaneity, there are numerous approaches to, and understandings of, this moment-to-moment generation of movement. Although I have delimited this work to include the voices of only six Philadelphia-based artists who work within a variety of settings, I have begun to reveal a range of understandings of dance improvisation. However, this study is in no way a comprehensive representation of the scope of improvisational dance practices in the United States. My desire to contribute to scholarship surrounding Africanist approaches to dance improvisation is based largely on my experiences in Burkina Faso. Thus, I have focused on Africanist and postmodern understandings of improvisation. In doing so, I recognize that this excludes an enormous range of cultures and dance forms that utilize improvisation for a variety of purposes; several artists, Esther Baker-Tarpaga and Marion Ramirez, touched upon the vast range of cultures and genres that involve improvisation.

Although I initially turned to Olivier Tarpaga, Zakiya Cornish, and Cachet Ivey for their work within an Africanist aesthetic, the overlap of influences as a result of the circulation of ideas and cultures in a globalized world became apparent. Similarly, although I reached out to Esther Baker-Tarpaga, Marion Ramirez, and Molly Shanahan for their work within what I am calling a postmodern context, it became evident how hard it is to define clear boundaries in their approaches to improvisation.

That being said, alongside the review of relevant literature, the interviews began to expose key philosophical and aesthetic characteristics of each context:

An Africanist Approach to Improvisation

To recap, scholarship focusing solely on improvisation in African dance is sparse, often buried within writing on African music and African American vernacular forms.[311] Despite the diversity of styles that constitute African dance, one can begin to formulate a set of characteristics that define the philosophy and aesthetics of improvisation in African-derived movement forms. Briefly, such characteristics include a deep connectivity to rhythm, improvisation as performance, communication and participation between audience and performers, a mutual knowledge and understanding of tradition among participants, and embellishment and innovation within tradition.[312] Several artists touch upon these principles in their interviews including Olivier Tarpaga, Esther-Baker-Tarpaga, Zakiya Cornish, and Cachet Ivey. They stress the interdependency of dance and music in Africanist understandings of improvisation. Additionally, both Cornish and Ivey speak of the bantaba, the dance circle in which a great deal of improvisation occurs, and stylization of movement, or placing one's personal stamp on traditional movement forms. It is important to note that both Cornish and Ivey are working within a neo-traditional context,[313] and that the nature of the class-setting does not leave as much room for improvisation as other contexts such as social settings or traditional ceremonies.[314]

Postmodern Improvisational Practices

The use of improvisation was highly associated with the experimental choreographic approaches of the Judson Dance Theater and its successors, which is reflected in the literature on the subject.[315] As several scholars have stated, improvisation in Western concert dance contexts has historically been used as a compositional tool for choreography.[316] In a culture that valued set choreography, improvisation was part of the process but not part of the finished product.[317] That said, in an attempt to challenge these norms, postmodern artists often utilized improvisation in performance to expose the process of dance-making.[318] As they worked toward unearthing the "authentic self," they sought an enhanced somatic awareness.[319] Several artists such as Esther Baker-Tarpaga, Marion Ramirez, and Molly Shanahan speak of accessing an internal awareness or state of mind through improvisation. And artists such as Marion Ramirez and Zakiya Cornish mention their attempt to reconcile a diverse set of influences in order to find themselves within their training. Additionally, influenced by avant-garde modern artists such as choreographer Merce Cunningham, postmodern artists often stripped dance of theatrical elements such as music and lighting.[320]

Keywords

As I mentioned, although I initially contacted Olivier Tarpaga, Zakiya Cornish, and Cachet Ivey for their work with African dance genres, and Esther Baker-Tarpaga, Marion Ramirez, and Molly Shanahan for their work with postmodern practices of improvisation, the amount of overlap between the two contexts soon became apparent.

I have complied a list of keywords to highlight the commonalities that exist within the range of improvisational approaches experienced by these artists. In doing so, I expose various recurring themes that arose during conversations about dance improvisation.

Table 1: Keywords

Keyword	Usage of Keyword
Spontaneity (spontaneous)	Esther Baker-Tarpaga Molly Shanahan
Free (freedom; freeing)	Esther Baker-Tarpaga Molly Shanahan Zakiya Cornish
Structure	Olivier Tarpaga Zakiya Cornish
Moment (in-the-moment)	Olivier Tarpaga Esther Baker-Tarpaga Molly Shanahan Zakiya Cornish
Mindful (mindfulness)	Esther Baker-Tarpaga Molly Shanahan
Music (musician)	Olivier Tarpaga Esther Baker-Tarpaga Marion Ramirez Zakiya Cornish Cachet Ivey
Rhythm	Olivier Tarpaga Marion Ramirez Zakiya Cornish Cachet Ivey
Listen (listening)	Esther Baker-Tarpaga Marion Ramirez Cachet Ivey
Practice	Marion Ramirez Molly Shanahan Zakiya Cornish

Carving a Space for Future Research

As I reflect upon my findings, I realize that this is merely a launching point for future research, both in improvisation as an Africanist aesthetic, and in the arena of dance improvisation in the United States at large. Several other topics that I have touched upon, including the contributions of African American postmodern artists, also deserve more attention in future research endeavors. That said, as it currently stands, this research can be used to spark conversations about what constitutes dance improvisation in the United States beyond the well-established work of the Judson Dance Theater and its successors. Additionally, in the introduction I briefly mentioned that my collaboration in Burkina Faso opened my eyes to the limited understanding of dance improvisation as it's taught in academia. Although my personal experience points to an emphasis on postmodern practices, a separate, more in-depth study is necessary to illuminate dance improvisation curricula in the university setting.

As a final note, in her interview, Esther Baker-Tarpaga briefly mentions her teaching approach in a dance improvisation classroom:

> I want to honor differences—I don't want people to think that they should look like me or look a certain way.[321]

Here, she illuminates a consideration for future research: Should dance educators choose to work towards a more inclusive improvisation classroom, they should honor the differences of their students. As I have begun to reveal, there is a diverse range of improvisational practices that exist in the United States. Using this work on improvisation as an Africanist aesthetic as a catalyst for further discussions, we can begin to work towards a more inclusive understanding of dance improvisation.

NOTES

[1] Broadly defined, American modern dance is a Western theatrical dance form which encompasses a range of personal styles and idioms that came about in reaction to classical ballet in the early-to-mid-twentieth century. Choreographers of this era include, but are not limited to, Loïe Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and Doris Humphrey (Banes 2011). Though often overlooked in historical overviews of dance, African American contributions to modern dance include Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, and Alvin Ailey.

[2] The Judson Dance Theater grew out of the work of students of Robert Dunn, a musician and who worked alongside Merce Cunningham and John Cage (Banes 1993). Cunningham's work is defined by an abstraction of music from movement; his movement aesthetic can be described as a melding of balletic postures of the body and expressive articulations of the spine, drawing inspiration from Martha Graham and her contemporaries (Banes 2011).

[3] The Grand Union is a post-Judson improvisational collective formed in 1970 with Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, David Gordon, Trisha Brown, and Douglas Dunn as its core members (Banes 1993; Ramsay 1991). For more on these artists see Banes 1993, 2002, 2011; DeSpain 2014.

[4] The "Downtown dance era" comes at the backend of Jazz era which comes at the back end of post-war era marked by a desire for creative freedom. Outsiders found this "freedom" in dances of the African diaspora. For more on this era of dance see Banes 2011.

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

[6] Over the course of this research, I turn to Kariamu Welsh to clarify the concept of "tradition" (2000). In her book, *Zimbabwe Dance: Rhythmic Forces, Ancestral Voices—An Aesthetic Analysis*, Welsh distinguishes between traditional and neo-traditional. Welsh acknowledges the ever-changing nature of tradition, and referencing dance scholar, Peggy Harper, she addresses that changes in lifestyle due to factors such as urbanization and colonization have resulted in neo-traditional dance forms; the meanings and movements may not necessarily change, but the context in which the dance is learned and performed does (Welsh 2000, 25-28).

[7] Agawu 1995; Drewal 1992; Gottschild 1996, 2003; Welsh 1996, 2000, 2001.

[8] See Banes 2011, 16.

[9] Foster 2002; Gottschild 1996; Thompson 1973.

[10] See Thompson 1973, 4.

[11] See Thompson 2002, 31-32.

[12] Agawu 1995; Drewal 1992, 2002; Gottschild 1996; Welsh 2000, 2002.

[13] Banes 1993, 2011; Foster 2002; Goldman 2010.

[14] See Banes 2011.

[15] See Gottschild 1996.

[16] Drewal 1992; Welsh 2000.

[17] Banes 2011; Burt 2006; Foster 2002.

[18] *OED*, n. 2.d.

[19] Ibid.

[20] See Drewal 1992, 119.

[21] See Goldman 5.

[22] *Warba* - The primary celebration dance of the *Mossi*, the largest ethnic group in central Burkina Faso. It is also considered to be the national dance of Burkina Faso. The 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 foot-steps and arm gestures. The buttock is 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.

[23] Banes 2003; Gottschild 1996.

[24] Gottschild 1996.

[25] See Gottschild 2003, xiii.

[26] Although I source dance scholar, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, who adapted and used the term inside of a dance context (1996, 2003), the term “Africanist” was first used by anthropologist, Melville J. Herskovits in his work, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941). It has since been used by contemporary African American scholars Joseph Holloway (1990) and Toni Morrison (1992).

[27] Desmond 1997.

[28] Gottschild 1996.

[29] See notes 2 and 3.

[30] See Thompson 1974, 5-45.

[31] Ibid, 17-18.

[32] Ibid, 18.

[33] Thompson 1973.

[34] Ibid, 41.

[35] Thompson 1973; Gottschild 1996.

[36] See Gottschild 1996, 11-19.

[37] See Gottschild 1996, 31.

[38] Ibid, 25.

[39] Ibid, 31.

[40] See Desmond 1997, 34.

[41] See DeFrantz 2004, 75.

[42] See Welsh 2001, 144.

[43] Ibid, 144-151.

[44] Ibid, 145.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Stearns and Stearns 1968.

[47] Ibid, xiv.

[48] Ibid, 14-15.

[49] Cayou 1970, 1971.

[50] See Cayou 1970, 9 and Cayou 1971, 6.

[51] Cayou 1970, 12.

[52] Hazzard-Donald 1990.

[53] Ibid, 3.

[54] Ibid, xi.

[55] Malone 1996.

[56] Ibid, 1-2.

[57] Ibid, 15.

[58] Gottschild 1996; Thompson 1974; Welsh 2001.

[59] Malone 1996, 10-11.

[60] See DeFrantz 2004, 69.

[61] See Malone 1996, 9-10.

[62] See Albright and Gere 2003, xv.

[63] Berliner, 1994; Cayou, 1971, 2012; Cobb, 2007; Gottschild, 1996; Jackson, 2001.

[64] Agawu 1995a, 1995b, 2001; Berliner 1993, 1994.

[65] Agawu 1995a, 1995b, 2001; Drewal 1992, 2003; Tiérou 1992.

[66] See Tiérou 1992,19.

[67] See Drewal 1992, xiii.

[68] Ibid, 12-13.

[69] Ibid, 15.

[70] Ibid, 23.

[71] Ibid, 13 and Drewal 2003, 119-121.

[72] See MacAloon 1984, 243-244.

[73] See Drewal 1992, 15 and Drewal 2003, 121.

[74] See Drewal 1992, 15.

[75] See Drewal 2003, 119.

[76] See McNaughton 2008, 53

[77] See Drewal 2003, 119.

[78] Albright and Gere 2003.

[79] Ibid, 119.

[80] See Drewal 2003, 120.

[81] Agawu 2001.

[82] See Locke 128.

[83] See Albright and Gere 2003, 123-124.

[84] Castaldi 2006.

[85] Castaldi 2006; Gottschild 1996; Thompson 1973; Welsh 2001.

[86] See Castaldi 8.

[87] Ibid, 11.

[88] Ibid, 10.

[89] Commonly referred to as a "finger piano," "thumb piano," or "hand piano," the mbira is a popular traditional instrument throughout Africa. Although a great variety of mbira exists, 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 1993, 9-10).

[90] Shona refers to a group of Bantu-speaking peoples who live in Zimbabwe and in parts of Mozambique and Zambia (Berliner 1993, 18).

[91] See Berliner 1993, 95.

[92] Ibid, 119.

[93] Ibid, 111.

[94] See Berliner 1994, 492.

[95] Ibid, 497.

[96] See Gottschild 1996, 55.

[97] See Willis 151.

[98] See Jackson 41.

[99] Ibid, 42.

[100] Ibid, 45.

[101] Ibid, 45.

[102] Ibid, 46.

[103] Ibid, 46.

[104] See Cobb 78.

[105] Gottschild 1996; Thompson 1973, 1974; Welsh 2001.

[106] Albright and Gere 2003; Banes 1993, 2003, 2011; Burt 2006; Foster 2002; Novack 1988, 1990.

[107] Foster 2002; Gottschild 1996.

[108] Goldman 2010; Gottschild 1996, 2003.

[109] Banes 2011.

[110] Ibid, 11-12.

[111] Banes provides a set of broad characteristics for modernism and postmodernism. According to Banes modernism in art is typically defined by the acknowledgement of the medium's materials, the separation of formal element, the abstraction of forms, and the elimination of external references as subjects. She goes on to say that postmodernism in art is marked by pastiche, irony, playfulness, the use of vernacular materials, the interest in process over product, breakdowns of boundaries between life and art, and new relationships between artist and audience (2011, 12).

[112] Manning 1988.

[113] Burt 2006.

[114] See Manning 34.

[115] See Burt 5-13.

[116] Banes 1993, 2011.

[117] Banes 1993.

[118] Banes 2011.

[119] See Banes 1993, 17.

[120] Banes 1993, 2011; Burt 2006.

[121] See Banes 2011, 40.

[122] Banes 2003, 2011.

[123] Banes 2003.

[124] See Banes 2003, 82.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Ibid.

[127] See Gottschild 1996, 31.

[128] Gottschild 1996.

[129] Ibid, 51.

[130] Ibid, 51.

[131] Ibid.

[132] See Gottschild 2003, 82.

[133] See Gottschild 1996, 57.

[134] Foster 2002.

[135] Banes 2003.

[136] See Foster 2002, 28.

[137] Ibid, 29.

[138] Ibid, 31-34.

[139] Ibid, 29.

[140] Foster 2002; Gottschild 2003.

[141] See Foster 2002, 39.

[142] Foster 2002; Gottschild 2003.

[143] Jawole Willa Jo Zollar qtd. in Gottschild 2003, 91.

[144] Foster 2002; Gottschild 2003.

[145] See Gottschild 1996, 27.

[146] Ibid, 27-28.

[147] Banes 1993, 2003, 2011; Burt 2006; Foster 2002.

[148] Banes 2003; Foster 2002; Novack 1990.

[149] See Novack 23.

[150] Kraut 2008.

[151] Ibid, 59.

[152] Ibid, 60.

[153] Banes 1993, 2003, 2011; Burt 2006; Foster 2002, Novack 1990.

[154] See Banes 2003, 79; my emphasis.

[155] See Foster 2002, 13.

[156] Drewal 1992.

[157] Banes 2003; Foster 2002.

[158] Banes 2011 and Banes 2003

[159] See Banes 2003, 82.

[160] Ibid, 83.

[161] See Banes 2011, 21.

[162] See Banes 2003, 78.

[163] See Ross 45.
[164] See Hayes 110-111.

[165] Ibid, 113.

[166] See Banes 2011, 41.

[167] Banes 1993, 2011; Burt 2006; Foster 2002; Novack 1990.

[168] See Banes 2011, 41.

[169] See Novack 10.

[170] Ibid, 15.

[171] Banes 2011; Novack 1990.

[172] See Novack 23-24.

[173] Ibid, 29-30.

[174] Ibid, 24.

[175] Banes 2011.

[176] See Burt 14.

[177] Ibid, 15.

[178] Ibid, 14.

[179] Banes 2003; Burt 2006; Foster 2002; Novack 1990.

[180] See Novack 43.

[181] See Banes 2003, 77.

[182] See Banes 1993, 17.

[183] Banes 1993; Novack 1990.

[184] Banes 1993; Foster 2002; Novack 1990.

[185] See Banes 2003, 78-79.

[186] Banes 2003; Novack 1990.

[187] Tarpaga, May 1.

[188] Ibid.

[189] Baker-Tarpaga, May 11.

[190] Cayou 1970; Gottschild 1996; Thompson 1974; Welsh 2000, 2001.

[191] University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

[192] Baker-Tarpaga, May 11.

[193] Ramirez, May 13.
[194] Ibid.

[195] Gottschild 1996; Thompson 1974; Welsh 2001.

[196] Ramirez, May 13.

[197] Ibid.

[198] Banes 1993, 2003, 2011; Burt 2006.

[199] Shanahan, May 20.

[200] Shanahan, May 20.

[201] Carter 2004.

[202] Cornish, May 23.

[203] Ibid.

[204] Desmond 1997.

[205] Ivey, May 24.

[206] Ibid.

[207] Gottschild 2003.

[208] Ivey, May 24.

[209] Ibid.

[210] Gottschild 2003.

[211] Tarpaga, May 1.

[212] Ibid.

[213] Tiérou 1992.

[214] Berliner 1993, 1994.

[215] Banes 2011.

[216] Foster 2002.

[217] Drewal 1992, 2003; Jackson 2001; Welsh 2001; Banes 2011; Foster 2002.

[218] Tarpaga, May 1.

[219] Berliner 1993; Drewal 1992; Tiérou 1992.

[220] Baker-Tarpaga, May 11.

[221] Novack 1990 and Banes 2003.

[222] Drewal 1992, 2003; Jackson 2001; Welsh 2001; Banes 2011; Foster 2002.

[223] Baker-Tarpaga, May 11.

[224] Novack 1990.

[225] Baker-Tarpaga, May 11.

[226] Banes 2003, 2011; Burt 2006.

[227] Ramirez, May 13.

[228] Ibid.

[229] Banes 2003.

[230] Ramirez, May 13.

[231] Ibid.

[232] Novack 1990; Ross 2003.

[233] Berliner 1993; Drewal 1992; Tiérou 1992.

[234] Banes 2003.

[235] Shanahan, May 20.

[236] Ibid.

[237] Ibid.

[238] Ibid.

[239] Ibid.

[240] Ibid.

[241] Cornish, May 23.

[242] The Dance Circle, or Circle of Celebration, used in *Malinke* (*Mandinka*) culture (an ethnic group whose people are widespread across West Africa.

[243] Manjani is a dance from Guinea that has traditionally been associated with female rites of passage.

[244] Cornish, May 23.

[245] Ibid.

[246] Berliner 1993; Drewal 1992; McNaughton 2008; Tiérou 1992.

[247] Cornish, May 23.

[248] Jackson 2001.

[249] Desmond 1997; Gottschild 1996; Welsh 2000, 2001.

[250] Cornish, May 23.

[251] Welsh 2000.

[252] Berliner 1993; Drewal 1992; Tiérou 1992.

[253] Cornish, May 23.

[254] Ibid.

[255] Ibid.

[256] Ivey, May 24.

[257] Ibid.

[258] Berliner 1993; Drewal 1992; McNaughton 2008; Tiérou 1992.

[259] Ivey, May 24.

[260] Ibid.

[261] Ibid.

[262] Ibid.

[263] Berliner 1993; Drewal 1992; McNaughton 2008; Tiérou 1992.

[264] Ivey, May 24.

[265] Berliner 1993.

[266] Tarpaga, May 1.

[267] Ibid.

[268] Developed by movement artist Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Body-Mind Centering (BMC) explores the ongoing dialogue between body and mind; between awareness and action. Broadly, "it is an experiential study based on the embodiment and application of anatomical, physiological, psychophysical and developmental principles, utilizing movement, touch, voice and mind" (Bainbridge Cohen).

[269] Baker-Tarpaga, May 11.

[270] Drewal 1992.

[271] Banes 1993, 2003, 2011.

[272] Ramirez, May 13.

[273] Ibid.

[274] Shanahan, May 20.

[275] Cornish, May 23.

[276] Drewal 1992, 2003.

[277] Cornish, May 23.

[278] Ostendorf 2013.

[279] Ivey, May 24.

[280] Berliner 1993.

[281] Ivey, May 24.

[282] Drewal 1992, 2003.

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[283] Tarpaga, May 1.

[284] Baker-Tarpaga, May 11.

[285] Ibid.

[286] Gottschild 2003.

[287] Ramirez, May 13.

[288] Shanahan, May 20.

[289] Ibid.

[290] Cornish, May 23.

[291] Ibid.

[292] Ivey, May 24.

[293] Gottschild 2003.

[294] Ivey, May 24.

[295] Desmond 1997; Welsh 2000.

[296] Tarpaga, May 1.

[297] Banes 1993.

[298] Baker-Tarpaga, May 11.
[299] Gottschild 1996, 2003.

[300] Banes 2011; Foster 2002.

[301] Baker-Tarpaga, May 11.

[302] Ramirez, May 13.

[303] Banes 2011.

[304] Shanahan, May 20.

[305] Ibid.

[306] Cornish, May 23.

[307] Ivey, May 24.

[308] DeFrantz 2004; Hazzard-Gordon 1990; Jackson 2001.

[309] Ivey, May 24.

[310] Ibid.

[311] Agawu 1995a, 1995b, 2001; Berliner 1993, 1994.

[312] Tiérou 1992; Agawu 1995a, 1995b, 2001; Drewal 1992, 2003.

[313] Welsh 2000.

[314] Ivey, May 24.

[315] Banes 1993, 2003, 2011; Burt 2006; Foster 2002.

[316] Banes 2003; Foster 2002; Novack 1990.

[317] See Novack 23.

[318] Bane 2011.

[319] Banes 2011; Novack 1990; Ross 2003.

[320] Banes 1993, 2011; Burt 2006.

[321] Baker-Tarpaga, May 11.

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APPENDIX

Research Integrity & Compliance
Student Faculty Center
3340 N. Broad Street, Suite 304
Philadelphia PA 19140

Institutional Review Board
Phone: (215) 707-3390
Fax: (215) 707-9100
e-mail: irb@temple.edu

Certification of Approval for a Project Involving Human Subjects

Date: 27-Apr-2016

Protocol Number: 23682
PI: WELSH, KARIAMU
Review Type: EXEMPT
Approved On: 27-Apr-2016
Approved From:
Approved To:
Committee: A1
School/College: BOYER COLLEGE OF MUSIC & DANCE (2200)
Department: MUSIC:DANCE (22320)
Sponsor: NO EXTERNAL SPONSOR
Project Title: A Comparative Study of Dance Improvisation in Africanist and Postmodern Contexts as Evidenced by Philadelphia-based Artists

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The IRB approved the protocol 23682.

If the study was approved under expedited or full board review, the approval period can be found above. Otherwise, the study was deemed exempt and does not have an IRB approval period.

If applicable to your study, you can access your IRB-approved, stamped consent document or consent script through eRA. **Open the Attachments tab and open the stamped documents by clicking the View icon next to each document**. The stamped documents are labeled as such.

Before an approval period ends, you must submit the Continuing Review form via the eRA module. Please note that though an item is submitted in eRA, it is not received in the IRB office until the principal investigator approves it. Consequently, please submit the Continuing Review form via the eRA module at least 60 days, and preferably 90 days, before the study's expiration date.

Note that all applicable Institutional approvals must also be secured before study implementation. These approvals include, but are not limited to, Medical Radiation Committee ("MRC"); Radiation Safety Committee ("RSC"); Institutional Biosafety Committee ("IBC"); and Temple University Survey Coordinating Committee ("TUSCC"). Please visit these Committees' websites for further information.

Finally, in conducting this research, you are obligated to submit modification requests for all changes to any study; reportable new information using the Reportable New Information form; and renewal and closure forms. For the complete list of investigator responsibilities, please see the Policies and Procedures, the Investigator Manual, and other requirements found on the Temple University IRB website: http://www.temple.edu/research/regaffairs/irb/index.html