

Abstract

For my thesis project, I created an afternoon of dance inspired by my exploration of “Free-Form Body Motifs” performed to free jazz music within the context of the Black Arts Movement. Through my investigation, I was able to transcribe jazz music into movement *motifs*, exploring the idea of *free* and how active listening translates music into body movement. In essence, this project enabled me to learn how to speak the language of the music by reacting to rhythms through isolated body parts. In particular, I focused on specific musical elements to create movement: ostinato (a repeated rhythm) and melodic phrasing (line of the melody). In my research and choreography, the musical ostinato is comparative to a dance motif and melodic phrasing is like *physical listening*, which is my method of translating music into movement.

My choreographic process, in addition to my research of the Black Arts Movement, led me on a new pathway of creating and expanding modern movement vocabulary. This project taught me that there is nothing random about this type of improvisation; it accentuates intention in the hearing and specificity in the musicality, while elevating a story in the movement with an undeniable intimacy between the dancer and musician.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

*PHYSICAL LISTENING: THE INFLUENCE OF THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT ON FREE
JAZZ-INSPIRED MOVEMENT*

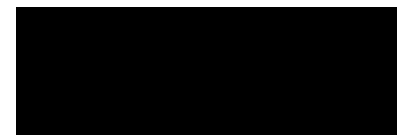
By
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A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts
May 2020

College/School: College of the Arts
Department: Theatre and Dance

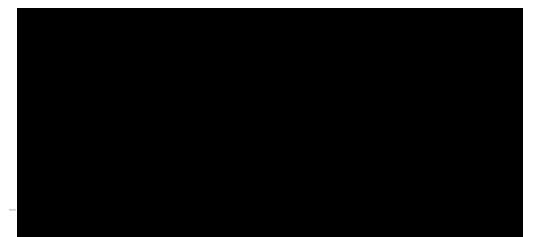
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Montclair, NJ

2020

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Acknowledgements

I am immensely grateful to the following people for supporting the idea, creation, and final manifestation of the performative and written elements of this thesis project:

Professor Maxine Steinman, my thesis sponsor, for understanding my vision from the beginning.

Professor Lauren Grant, my thesis committee member, for being so thorough and having an incredible eye.

Professor Claire Porter, my thesis committee member, for helping me synthesize my thoughts into the simplest form.

Professor Elizabeth McPherson and the faculty of the MFA Dance program at Montclair State University, for unconditional support and flexibility.

Madeline Cantor, Director of Dance Program at Bryn Mawr College, for so generously donating the resources and space for the performance.

Farid Barron, for his musical genius and wealth of knowledge.

My mom, for always believing in me.

My children Lorraine and Ellington, for being beams of light and inspiring me everyday.

My husband, Brent White, for his immeasurable support, artistic guidance, creative impetus and unconditional love and encouragement through this two-year endeavor.

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Introduction

My interest in improvising to free jazz¹ music started in 2009, when I performed with the Sun Ra Arkestra in Philadelphia. It was my first time improvising with a live band, and the first time that I experienced a strong spiritual connection with a musician (see Fig. 1). In 2012, this inspired my composer/jazz-trombonist husband and I to develop *Putty Dance Project*, as an outlet to produce both improvised and choreographed works to original jazz music scores.



Fig 1. Lauren Putty White dancing with the Sun Ra Arkestra at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia in 2009.

¹ Sometimes referred to as avant garde jazz, free jazz was an attempt to break from the traditions of jazz and create something entirely new.

Exploring this live jazz and dance partnership gave me the motivation to present *Physical*

Listening: The Influence of the Black Arts Movement on Free Jazz-Inspired Movement.

The Black Arts Movement and philosophy became a prominent research component in my thesis because Sun Ra was one of the most influential musicians during the Black Arts Movement. Sun Ra included both dancers and musicians in his band. Farid Barron was a fitting choice collaborator for my project because of his direct connection as the first pianist to sit in Sun Ra's chair since Sun Ra's death, giving my thesis a clear direction as well as a connection to the history I was exploring. Sun Ra's music was intended to transport Black people to another planet often known as the *space is the place*,² and away from oppression. Farid Barron and I collaborated on a new arrangement of the jazz standard *Take the A Train* by Duke Ellington along with Sun Ra's composition *Love in Outer Space*, and two improvised compositions on piano and the Korg Monotrone Delay.³ Throughout this creative process, I formulated a new vocabulary embodying the cultural influences of the Black Arts Movement drawing from my background in modern dance, jazz dance, and hip hop. And, in working within the familiar

² *Space is the Place* is a science fiction film about sending black people to outer space.

³ The Korg Monotrone Delay is a keyboard synthesizer.

territory of jazz music, I incorporated improvisational structures into my movement practice associated with free jazz music (*physical listening*).

Research

The Black Arts Movement/Defining the Era

The Black Arts Movement, also known as the Black Aesthetics Movement, was a vibrant era in poetry, visual arts, dance, and music centered in New York City between 1965-1975. Pure living, clean eating, and spiritual enlightenment defined this artistic community. During the Black Arts Movement, dance improvisation reflected the lifestyle of the times, when Blacks were coping with the loss of spiritual leaders such as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The arts became a platform for addressing social injustices. Jazz was considered the soundtrack of the Black Arts Movement era, and hearing the phrasing in the music was a way for Black dancers to express themselves. Many dancers advanced the art of dance improvisation during the ongoing rise of black pride and black aesthetics, using their art as a form of activism.

Another factor happening parallel to this time period was the aspect of NYC known as *fear city*, consisting of extremist groups such as The Black Liberation Army, gang wars, poverty, drugs, and theft. The city was considered so dangerous that they handed out *Fear City* pamphlets to tourists with survival tips to stay safe, encouraging people to stay off the streets of Manhattan after 6pm to avoid the muggings and murders that were happening at night. According to this

pamphlet, which was written in 1975 by the NYC Counsel for Public Safety, the “Subway crime is so high that the City recently had to close off the rear half of each train in the evening so that the passengers could huddle together and be protected” (3). Choreographer Dianne McIntyre, heavily immersed in the Black Arts Movement, remembers the euphoria she experienced after performances she attended at the music venue The East. “It would be 2:30 am or 3:00 am in the morning when the set was over and they would have that feeling with them riding back home on the subway” (McIntyre). This quote shows the passion and camaraderie these artists experienced, in spite of the violence going on at that time.

The Black Arts Movement brought the terms *blackness* and *post-blackness* to light. Blackness encapsulated the black experience. Living life as a black person during that era not only carried a sense of struggle but also a sense of pride, which became evident in the art. Post-blackness is similar to the term *postmodern* as it focuses on the abstractness of the black aesthetic, a vision of what the black community could look like in the future, leaving more space for progression and evolution. In this space, Susan Foster explains “Working to renew Harlem’s legacy of leadership in black artistic production, participants in the Black Arts movement formulated new concepts of community, audience, and the uniqueness of black cultural production” (39). The Black Arts Movement promoted art that directly addressed the needs of black people and “would enable African American artists to free themselves from ‘white

standards' of judgment under which their work was usually deemed lacking" (Collins 8). This Movement was an opportunity for blacks to share authentic work without being undermined or stereotyped as in the era of minstrelsy and vaudeville during which they were forced to mock themselves.

According to McIntyre, black artists were not making art to look pretty or aesthetically pleasing, but to expand the consciousness of black people. This consciousness helped shape the culture and theology. James Cone explains, "Black culture consists of the creative forms of expression as one reflects on history, endures pain, and experiences joy. It is the black community expressing itself in music, poetry, prose, and other art forms" (27). Through the search for higher consciousness, the Black Arts Movement encouraged collaboration and allowed artists to see and appreciate each other's art from a different standpoint than that of their own.

Dance Improvisation in NYC in the 1970's

In the mid to late 1960's leading into the Black Arts Movement, Judson Dance Theatre and the Grand Union dance group emerged. Grand Union, birthed out of Judson's expansion of dance vocabulary, experimented with speech and pedestrian-like movement. They brought other aspects of theatre into movement. As Melanie Bales and Rebecca Netti-Fiol explain, "The Grand Union performers would perform set choreography, improvise skits, quote stock characters and

movement idioms, extemporaneously devise new characters, and comment meta-theatrically on these activities as they were happening” (57). Improvisation included spontaneity and structure in its practice, complementing the approach to their dancer/musician connection which was also relevant to that of the Black Arts Movement.

Judson Dance Theatre dancer Judith Dunn and trumpeter Bill Dixon were keen to the dancer/jazz musician partnership. Dunn, a white woman known for her modern choreography and improvisation abilities, and Dixon, a black man known for his improvisational abilities in jazz music, were a great example of the dancer/musician collaboration. Danielle Goldman states:

Dunn and Dixon worked to be on stage together, striving against the grain of their disciplines and historical expectations—regarding the ways in which men and women should behave, interracial partnerships, the power relations between musicians and dancers, and the status of their respective forms— to engage in rigorous, improvisational ensemble. (69)

Dunn and Dixon taught workshops together in experimental dance composition, teaching methods and improvisation.

While a student at Ohio State University, Dianne McIntyre had the privilege of taking class with Dunn and Dixon. These lessons helped shape McIntyre’s future creative inquiries as Goldman explains:

Although Judith Dunn and Bill Dixon were significant in their own right, they also helped to inspire the investigations of Dianne McIntyre, another young dancer who built upon their legacy and continued to challenge the racial and gender divisions within the worlds of improvised music and dance.... In many ways, McIntyre emerged out of the same tradition as Dunn, receiving similar modern dance training. But as a black woman, she fit into that tradition differently. (75)

There was some borrowing between both the black and white dance traditions in postmodern dance similar to the way Jazz music developed a few decades earlier.

In black culture, the root of improvisation lies in the idea of no structure within a structure. Jackie Malone describes this:

All African American social dances allow for some degree of improvisation, even in the performance of such relatively controlled line dances as the Madison and the stroll of the fifties.... The idea of executing any dance exactly like someone else is usually not valued.... Black idiomatic dancers always improvise with intent—they compose on the spot—with the success of the improvisations depending on the mastery of nuances and the elements of craft called for by the idiom. (33–34)

As Mallone indicates, even within the black social dance tradition there was evidence of this improvised dynamic. Goldman concurs, saying “[V]ernacular dance, especially in African

American traditions, requires both spontaneity and control” (9). This is an aspect of African culture that McIntyre captures well in her choreographic work. She expressed that her dance making process was always a combination of choreography and improvisation, based on the conversation between dancer and dancer, musician and dancer, or both. There is evidence of McIntyre’s training in social dance in her work. Sometimes she would incorporate shimmies, hip shakes, or struts from dance hall while improvising. Improvisation was about the collaboration of artists working together to free themselves of a past of being bound. McIntyre’s work and process is in keeping with others of her peers. Speaking about McIntyre and others, Goldman writes, “The improvisational practices that these artists developed challenged typical divisions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ forms of expression, gendered relations between postmodern dance and jazz, and the assumed whiteness of the avant-garde” (11). This method of approaching improvisation began even before the Black Arts Movement era in the 1970’s.

Another choreographer who worked in this realm of postmodern dance and jazz was Eleo Pomare, who also improvised to free jazz music. Susan Foster describes Pomare’s work: “The improvised solo *Junkie* (1965), which formed part of the choreographer Eleo Pomare’s epic work *Blues for the Jungle* (1966), is emblematic of Black Arts movement concerns. Describing the solo as a ‘study in self-destruction,’ a choreographic rendition of ‘articulated anger,’ Pomare erupts as a series of characters parading the effects of a progression of drugs on the body” (39).

His vibratory torso movements matched the quick snare drums, and his pulsating feet stepped to the melodic fragments of the piano, transcribing the song *Better git it in your soul*, by jazz musician Charles Mingus, into movement. It was the intuitive connection of the movement to the music that inspired improvisation to emerge and the embedded history of the black experience that drove the creativity of the Black Arts Movement.

Black Dance as a Genre

Black dance did not officially become ethno-culturally categorized as such until the Black Arts Movement era. This *genre* is known to combine African traditional dances, African diasporic dances and African American vernacular expressions. Although choreographers such as Alvin Ailey, Donald McKayle, Pearl Primus, and Katherine Dunham often told stories of blackness, it wasn't until the late 1960's and early 1970's that the style itself was given a name.

Angela Gittens states:

These choreographers not only empowered Black bodies onstage through African-based movements that were new to the American mainstream dance industry; as artistic directors, they articulated the politics and aesthetics behind their choreography. The Black arts movement not only marks the launching point for African choreography as a centerpiece within Black dance in the United States, but it was also the period in which much of the scholarship on the Black dancing body within the American performance began. (56)

The stories of blackness gave black choreographers a voice, an opinion, and made a statement in a way that social and vernacular dance could not. Therefore, they were able to define a new movement language rooted in black culture, for black dancing bodies, which emerged as a unique artform.

The Reign of Sun Ra

Sun Ra was well aware of black consciousness during his rise to the mainstream in the Black Arts Movement. Utilizing his popularity, he worked to create a new world of hope for the community around him. Sun Ra was spiritually oriented as he strove to use his music which he termed his Ark, as in Noah's ark, to transport black people to another metaphorical planet. According to Thomas Stanley, "In effect, like Noah's very large boat, Sun Ra offered his Arkestra [his Ark orchestra] as a hedge against the large-scale annihilation..." (157). To accomplish this, his Arkestra produced multidimensional shows including space costumes, dance, film, and poetry to, as Margot Crawford explains "...embrace of that which does not exist (the wildly fantastical) as a means of uncovering the black oppression that does exist" (63). Sun Ra believed that through creative discipline, the spiritual realm could be accessed to open a new level of consciousness and hope for black people.

Sun Ra's music was highly influential in the Black Arts Repertory Theatre/School (BARTS) community, which was founded in 1965 in Harlem by Amiri Baraka. Of the

organization, Crawford writes “We [BARTS] brought Sun Ra into the community. People were saying Sun Ra’s too out there for the people. But people thought it was dance music, they started dancing to it. Sun Ra’s Afrofuturism epitomizes the black post-blackness that shaped the most nuanced parts of the BAM [Black Arts Movement]” (Crawford 62). Sun Ra was one of the musicians Dianne McIntyre listened to when she was a college student at Ohio State University. She described him to be on another spectrum of music. As a part of his musical experimentation, he often worked with dancers, including them in the Arkestra as if they were a part of the band. Carla Washington, an original dancer with the Sun Ra Arkestra, said, “the more I started listening to the abstract side of Sun Ra, I started hearing it, and I started understanding his language of music more.” After nearly two weeks of going to the Sun Ra house in Philadelphia and observing the rehearsals to learn that style of the music, Washington explains that she could finally hear the one count. (This one count in a song is in reference to repeated musical phrasing that always starts from the beginning again.) Washington further describes working with Sun Ra: “One thing about Sun Ra’s music is that you could dance on top of the music and it allowed you to dance in between the sound of the movement of the music. He was a genius at that and I learned a lot working and touring with the Sun Ra Arkestra.” The exploration of improvisation in jazz music and modern dance within the culture of Sun Ra, helped define what it meant to exist in the spiritual world while living in the natural world.

Emergence of Hip Hop

Another form of dance improvisation and jazz-influenced music that was popular during the Black Arts Movement era was hip hop. Hip hop is a cultural movement that emerged in the Bronx, New York in the early 1970's within the African American and Hispanic communities. In the beginning, it became a vehicle to redirect gang violence and negativity into positive exchange and community. The lyrics in the songs were about uniting; the dancing channeled potential negative energy into gracious and athletic movement; and the graffiti art decorated urban structures, bringing neighborhoods together. Traditions such as *cyphers*⁴ and *battling*⁵ not only honored the spontaneous dependence on whatever song the DJ played but also represented the sense of community and respect amongst the dancers, as well as a healthy competitiveness that showed integrity between team players. This was commonly displayed in break dancing in particular, which is also known as b-boying. Joseph Schloss gives detail: "B-boy songs are valued as frameworks for the act of b-boying because they combine practical factors that facilitate the particular dance style (including fast tempos, loud drums, rhythmic horns and breaks) with socio-historical associations that place any given performance in the context of b-boy history" (28). Born in a social setting, hip hop dance "as an artistic construct is inseparable from strong influences circulating in hip hop music, rhymes and visual art" (Miller and Ferrell

⁴ Cypher is the name of the circle where dancers gather to take turns freestyling or improvising in the middle.

⁵ A dance battle is an improvised competition between two individual dancers or dance groups.

1). The dancer/musician relationship holds prominence even in this genre as the DJ plays the role of orchestrating the music to enable the dancer to improvise according to the continuity of the beat. According to Rong Zhi Li, and Yonatan Asher Vexler:

During the break, partygoers were stimulated to discover various ways of using physical motion to express the sounds of the music, and prolonging the break availed time to not only enjoy one's own dancing, but to also see which moves other people were using to express the sounds of the music, and this is how the dance element to accompany the musical element of hip hop was born. (432)

DJ's often played funk music, a derivative of jazz music. The ideas of rhythm and melody are similar in both of these genres. Inevitably, the response in movement is also similar: the inclination to articulate every happening in the music is once again taking place in a black cultural context.

Raphael Xavier, Philadelphia's renowned hip hop dancer and breaker, explains that improvising comes with "being fully present and aware of what's happening in your environment." He also believes it is more about reacting to what is being heard. When referencing jazz music in connection to hip hop dance he says they both came with a stigma of racism, where they couldn't be performed in certain clubs because of the image that accompanied them. The image of break dancers in how they dressed and presented themselves was associated with street dancing, which was undervalued and overlooked as a creative art

form. Xavier makes a powerful statement regarding the intentions behind the arts in black culture, including the birth of hip hop and coming out of the “slavery mentality.” He states, “We need to go against the grain, we need to create something that works for us to move us forward. We need to look at what’s happening in our environment or our surroundings and community and use that to move forward to make a better situation for us” (Xavier). Xavier’s statement is yet another reiteration of the importance of black pride and its creative power.

Methodology

Background

In my first graduate *Special Projects* class during Fall 2018, I utilized my choreographic residency at Bryn Mawr College to explore a new approach to musicality through jazz music. I created a 9-minute jazz piece based on cross rhythms⁶ and the triplet.⁷ As a secondary component, I developed two movement etudes⁸ that divided 9 beats into 3 beats. This investigation led to a written essay for my *Research, Writing and Publications* course that highlighted my contrasting pedagogical methods teaching musicality to students and professional dancers. My most recent research development is my design of a new course, *Physical Listening*

⁶ Cross rhythms are the simultaneous combination of contrasting rhythms.

⁷ The triplet is a portion of musical time split into three equal parts.

⁸ Movement etudes are short exercises designed to improve technique.

for Dancers, which trains the body how to respond musically to what the ear captures when listening to music.

In Spring 2019, during my second *Special Projects* course, I collaborated with a jazz pianist to arrange jazz standards in 4/4 time to an improvisational subdivided structure surrounding the eighth-note, quarter-note and half-note triplets. Focusing on these particular songs composed in what musicians call *odd meter* sparked my curiosity about free jazz. As a result, I learned about the Black Arts Movement's influence on free jazz. Through this research, I highlighted the social, political, and historical context from which free jazz derived in the 1960's and 70's, specifically through Sun Ra's music.

For my final *Special Projects* course during Fall 2019, I conducted interviews with: Dianne McIntyre, a dancer during the Black Arts Movement; Carla Washington, a dancer with the Sun Ra Arkestra; Hip Hop dancer Raphael Xavier,⁹ and musician/composer Farid Barron. I included Raphael Xavier for his perspective on the birth of Hip Hop during the Black Arts Movement and the genre's similarities to free jazz in improvisational structure. Each of these *Special Projects* explorations were essential in my developing thesis project.

⁹ Raphael Xavier is a break dancer who collaborates with live jazz musicians.

Defining Physical Listening

Just like improvisation, I consider *physical listening* to be a skill. As I envision it, it requires active, as opposed to passive, listening. A person passively listens when aware of, but not focused on, sounds; the music resides in the background of their consciousness. When actively listening to music, one focuses on what the ear hears and how it processes the information. The body joins this processing when a full physicalized response to the listening is integrated with active listening. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines listening in three ways: “to pay attention to sound,” “to hear something with thoughtful attention: give consideration,” and “to be alert to catch an expected sound.” Keywords here are *attention*, *thoughtful*, *alert* and *catch*. When listening with the body, attention automatically goes to the rhythm or pulse of the music, the consistent underlying beat that triggers initial movement. In this, thoughtfulness must be in the intent of the listening. Alertness is simply having all senses awakened so that the body is able to receive everything the music has to offer. Then there is catching the unexpected or predicting the melodic phrase that comes with listening to a song for the first time yet already knowing it. According to French psychologist, Paul Fraisse, “All the rhythms we perceive ‘are rhythms which originally resulted from human [motor] activity’” (Guedes 485).

As I define it, *physical listening* translates nuances, beats, and accents of music into movement, exploring with a freedom that enables a breaking away from the confines of

choreography and creates an interplay between the dancer and musician. This means that the dancer can distinguish the instruments, the time signature, and the body itself as another instrument adding to the conversation of the music. This is most pronounced during call and response settings where the dancer is improvising with the musician, relying on the conversation to inform the movement.

Ear Training for the Body

Ear training is about teaching the musician how to identify time, articulation, and duration in the music. It helps “assist listeners in understanding the music they are hearing...[,] develops the inner ear and provides the creative imagination with a musical lexicon” (Prosser 6). Therefore ear training for the body is when the body serves as the descriptor of what the ear is hearing, relating itself to the “patterns of the underlying accompaniment texture, the structure, the nuances, the expressive nature...” (Tech 5). This is different from *physical listening* in that ear training for the body is movement that has sensitivity to sound and reflects an understanding of musical vocabulary. *Physical listening* also involves sensitivity to sound and an understanding of musical vocabulary, but it also allows one to speak musical vocabulary through conversational movement with the music itself.

Rhythm and Melodic Phrasing

The rhythm/ostinato and melody are the two reliable support systems when interplaying with live music in an improvisatory space. These can be understood as sound patterns, which in summary is what music produces. To achieve these patterns, “Music is structured basically by these five processes: development, repetition, contrast, variation, and imitation” (Teck 14).

When following a rhythmic pattern, you are following repetition, which sets up the form. In free jazz music and Sun Ra’s music in particular, there is a combination of form mixed with chaos (chaos can be found in the melody). The rhythm and melodic phrasing are the two elements that the body can rely on to hear the beat. The beat presents a steady pulse that can establish movement continuity in the connection between the chaos in the melody.

Melody is defined by Merriam-Webster as “a rhythmic succession of single tones organized as an esthetic whole.” It is the more musical or tuneful aspect of the song, often highlighted in lyrics, repetition, and variation. The melody itself creates layers within the structure of the music. In translating the variations of a musical melody through a physicalized response, the nuances or ‘contours’ revealed through the free movement evoke emotional states of being. Katherine Teck describes: “The parts of the arm in fact suggest a good visual analogy to melody in music: there is an overall shape, but there are interior parts that can be angled or smoothed to present varying contours. Furthermore, the muscles can be tensed or relaxed and in

so doing, can suggest or convey emotional states” (163). Just as the musculature frame of our arms have different shapes and emotional responses, melody has the same effect in music.

Involving the body and using movement to physicalize what you hear unveils other layers of the conscious self. “Body listening for dance is simply to attend closely to the processes, functions, needs, and intuitions of the body within the context of dance”

(Enghauser 33). *Physical listening* is most evident when the contour of movement matches the melodic phrasing of the music.

Application of Musical Principles as a Choreographic Tool

To begin my choreographic process for *Physical Listening: The Influence of the Black Arts Movement on Free Jazz-Inspired Movement*, Barron and I selected songs that are arrangements by Sun Ra from the 70’s. I wanted first to use two songs that best exemplified free jazz. Sun Ra’s arrangement of *Take the A Train* is an abstract interpretation of the Jazz standard by Duke Ellington and *Love in Outerspace* is an original composition by Sun Ra that best displays the form/chaos dynamic. Barron provided a recording of new solo piano arrangements of both *Take the A Train* and *Love in Outerspace*.

Barron’s version of *Take the A Train* has a very clear ostinato that I used as the base for my choreographic development of movement motifs. Since the ostinato is about repetition, it provided the structure for which parts of the song would be choreographed and which would be

improvised. I decided to choreograph a motif for each instance in which the ostinato returned in the song and improvise all the smaller melodic phrases that present the main melody in different ways. As Barron's arrangement did not maintain the ostinato entirely throughout the song, I had more free form to work with in the melodic phrasing. This was also the best way to rehearse because it was the one group piece utilizing all three of us, and we could navigate the outline of the music without the need to completely depend on it. This was crucial considering that Barron would not be playing it exactly like the recording once we were working live. The upbeat tempo established how we would reflect the fast energy of the song yet counter it by physically listening to the occasional changes in rhythm. Since he was working with a solo instrument and no band, this made the focus easier for us to clarify these changes.

In the second section, *Love in Outerspace*, my solo with Barron on piano, I focused solely on the ostinato, choreographing to the consistent pulsating rhythm that remained steady throughout the entire piece. This ballad-like rendition sounded almost like a lullaby dream sequence, so I played with those nuances heard in that theme and each time he changed the melody, I inserted improvised transitions to respond to his improvised calls in the music.

The last two sections of the show were fully improvised musical and dance pieces. We rehearsed the improvised sections for a few rehearsals leading up to the show to give everyone an opportunity to play with varied approaches and creative impulses. The first of those last two

sections was a solo for my dancer, Joe Gonzalez, with Barron playing the Korg Monotrone Delay. The final dance of the concert was a duet between Gonzalez and Sarah Warren with Barron on piano, once again. Gonzalez's solo was entirely dependent on the music, calling and responding to the levels in sound, pitch, and tone. This was accomplished through the body's use as a percussive instrument creating different rhythms echoing the sounds of the Korg and Gonzalez's vocalizations to capture or initiate spontaneous melodic phrases.

The duet between Warren and Gonzalez extended this exploration as Barron returned to the piano, taking visual cues from the dancers to direct his musical choices. The dancers responded to the quality of Barron's strike of the keys. His attack on the piano dictated the tempo and quality of their movements. With no defining melody in the music, the dancers created the melody with their own body rhythms in relation to themselves, their quality of movement through space, the sounds made on the floor, and each other. Consequently, Barron followed this patterning and mirrored them in his rhythms.

Analysis of Free Form Body Motifs

Take the A Train

When I consider how the Black Arts Movement has influenced my development of *Free Form Body Motifs*, the word *movement* comes to mind. I began my choreographic and improvisatory process with a focus on the concept of movement and the multiple possible

meanings of that word. Movement can denote the physical transfer of people or things. I contemplated the ideas of migration and traveling both outside as well as inside the body. I thought about the urban migration,¹⁰ where 4.3 million Blacks moved from the South to the North between 1940 and 1970, and its impact. Ray Suarez explains, “[O]ne of the Great Migrations of American history took place, and it continues to shape the country to this day, politically, economically, and socially” (2). I examined how a *movement* can also be a statement made by a community and how that statement could involve literally physical movement. I then imagined what that would look like as a blended picture of movement as a community’s statement with movement as a community in physical motion. *Take the A Train*, by Duke Ellington, was a perfect song with which to enter into this work because the train was moving; it represented the start of a physical, spiritual, visual, and emotional journey that was about to take place within the work. It evoked feelings of joy, lightheartedness, and playfulness, driving the energy of the choreographed motifs to the melodic phrases as well as the improvised moments.

Striving to establish togetherness in this opening section, much of it was done in unison even though there were many moments during which we were not doing the same choreography. The improvised moments were based on the following word pictures: *throw, sink, twist, unravel, fight, surrender, melt, fold, expand, hover, roll, contract, glide, shake and shimmy*. These words presented specific movement qualities associated with struggle, oppression, joy and pride, which

¹⁰ From 1940-1970 five-million African Americans moved from the South to the North for employment.

are reflective of the Black Arts Movement era. The vibratory torso contractions and hip shaking combined with tapping of the bare feet and shoulder shimmies in this piece, revealed elements of African American social dances. We demonstrated the influence of *Buck* dances, which are weighted movements in the feet and very rhythmic. We kept some distance between us for most of the piece, and it was not until the end that we made physical contact. This displayed how, through chaos, comes order, community, and support. We separated yet remained close and then exited together with one accord. Collectively, we were in tune.

Love in Outerspace

The solo that followed, and was performed by me, was a natural transition from the fast, varied musical arrangement of *Take the A Train* because it eased into something of a dream state. The cosmic, lullaby sound was something magical, reminiscent, melancholy, and pensive. It made me recall what and who came before me, encouraging me to pay homage to my ancestors. The idea of dreaming of a better world, similar to Sun Ra's intention, led me to start with two simple words to create my motifs, *grow* and *shrink*.

The high pitch notes Barron employed throughout the duration of the song challenged me to work within levels ranging from high to low, not just through space, but sequentially through my body as well, isolating different limbs. I started with my head rocking back and forth to emulate the ostinato pulsating as the base line. Through this, I established my own rhythmic

pulse which carried throughout the entire piece. I wanted to highlight the quickness of Barron's hands by shuffling my feet as a frequent transition, transporting from one place to the next, while combining elements of both the *Jig* and *Wing* dances of the 20th century. *Wing* dances are dances in which one literally flaps parts of the body like wings, so I used my legs to flap my knees as a natural choice for that which the music had initiated. The *Jig* brings increased velocity to the movement and focus on footwork, so I played around with foot and leg isolations to reaffirm my ideas of transference and transporting myself through space. As the song itself reiterates, *Love in Outerspace* can represent love in an otherworldly perspective, something bigger than us, a spiritual existence outside of ourselves.

Transcendence

The most logical progression was to move into an improvised solo, or should I say duet, between dancer Gonzalez and musician Barron playing the Korg Monotrone Delay, which is a piano synthesizer that can produce analog-like echo effects in the sound. This solo was a deep look into the spiritual aspect of the Black Arts Movement and how religious faith was an anchor of hope in the black community. It represented the power of a spiritual awakening, prayer, and seeking peace and direction from God. I provided Gonzalez with four short movement motif pictures to work with: *hanging; spinning continuously; rhythmic patterns that make noise on the floor, in the air, and in the voice; prayerful; and awakening of the senses*. These movement ideas

were inspired by the image of having an outer body experience, which is the way one would describe a spiritual encounter. I wanted to highlight a divine presence moving from outside of the body to entering the body. Since Sun Ra also valued the natural world and the spiritual, it was important to capture and embody the essence of these themes. The intent was to use different parts of the body including the vocals to show breath and connection to the sounds that were driving how and when the movement would be executed. Barron took liberty also to allow Gonzalez's movement choices to dictate what he was playing, so there was much interdependence between them both in this section. Though there was no clear musical ostinato or melodic phrasing, the call and response was still evident in Gonzalez's dancing as he repeated those four given movement motif ideas in an array of different ways. Sometimes he made the echoes of his voice sound like spinning or his body would hang upside down on the floor as opposed to in the air. There was a true display of transcendence when the music seemed to enter his vessel and the *physical listening* was manifested and evident.

Journey

Gonzalez's solo continued into the improvised duet with Warren, with Barron returning to the piano. To bring cohesiveness to the overall work, I came back to the central idea of movement and migration, and as a result, the word *journey* emerged to the forefront of my

inspiration for this final section. I provided Gonzalez and Warren with specific direction and word pictures that helped shape their narrative.

The background story was the longing of coming together to build community and relationship using eight descriptive words as the base for their movement development: *fold, lean, tremble, linger, sway, gaze, punch and ease*. These words could be performed interactively, so there was room for creative ways to discover their expansiveness. I chose these words seeking to discover the potential in the outcome of those actions, mainly because each of those particular actions warranted a reaction. In addition to this, the dancers had to accent the pitch with level changes as well as accent the texture of the sounds with complementary movement qualities. I also required them to continue with the exploration of call and response, creating rhythmic patterns with the music and each other. They were instructed to start on opposite sides of the space and begin with the hand, feeling the blood free-flow through the body like a pulse flowing through every limb, muscle and tendon. The sound of the music had to be intrinsic. The words were there to act as a narration of the journey while the music served as a guide, informing their bodies what to do, how to react, and what to feel. The beauty was in seeing them take turns as the follower and the leader while in such a vulnerable state. Barron mediated the melodic call and response with the dancers as he skillfully shifted through tempo, rhythm and melody,

defining my earlier reference of hearing the movement in the music. The journey was heard in the music and in the body, connecting all performers in a united harmony through to the end.

Results and Implications for the Future

Audience/Participant Feedback from the Performance

Following the performance, I moderated a talkback. Based on the audience's response to the work and the feedback of the dancers and musician, the performance was a great success.

The stimulating questions and thoughtful comments, in reference to what was presented, led to interesting and constructive dialogue. One amazing response from a viewer described how, even though she had a passive role as a seated audience member, she felt something kinetic move through her that connected her to the dancers and made her feel as though she was moving with them. It was a feeling she could not quite describe, but she knew she loved the experience.

Barron immediately made the connection for her and explained that it was the Holy Ghost, referencing the black church tradition that once you empty yourself of active thought, the spirit can move through you. Another important factor that Barron revealed during that exchange was that the word Jazz is a distortion (Duke Ellington also believed the word Jazz to be derogatory) and is actually meant to be spelled and pronounced as *Jah's*, which is what the Africans called it when they brought it to America. Barron said that the term was always about emptying the body or vessel and allowing the spirit to come in. When the dancers were asked how they experienced

this process in comparison to our past work together, they both agreed that previous projects were more choreographically focused with a majority of set movement, but with this project, they enjoyed exploring the unpredictability of the work.

Warren expressed that it forced her to be in tune with how Barron was playing, and how Gonzalez was moving, resulting in a shared movement experience. Gonzalez felt that musically my work has always been challenging, but that throughout this process, it required more of a self-journey. The structured improvisation allowed him to have much more freedom within his own movement vocabulary.

Barron commented that playing off of Gonzalez's movement proved fun and challenging. He also stated that Sun Ra believed that form always underlined chaos and that the creation of beautiful music required the self-discipline of intentional listening. It was Barron's first time performing as a soloist with dancers, and he found it to be a rewarding experience.

Conclusion

In my early career, my dance practice was regimented, count-oriented, and experienced through passively listening to the music. All this changed when I was thrown into an opportunity to dance with the Sun Ra Arkestra in 2009. Without any rehearsal or knowing the music, I felt the spirit in a moment of chance, and it became the freest moment I had ever experienced while dancing. That moment was my inspiration for this thesis.

The purpose of this thesis was to lead me to a refined understanding of translating free jazz music into movement and help fine-tune my practice of *physical listening* as both an artist and an educator. Before my thesis performance, I hoped to have explored and developed a new pathway of creating and expanding modern movement vocabulary that gives free jazz music another language to speak through.

After my thesis I realized this is only the beginning of my research, and I will expand my creative practice in several ways. I plan to continue this legacy of free jazz-inspired movement by practicing my *physical listening* approach in all of my choreographic endeavors. I will also further explore the social movement ties to the Black Arts Movement era and work more of that into my current movement vocabulary. Additionally, for my performance practice, Farid Barron has formed a new jazz band, The Myth-Story Science 6. I am thrilled to be part of the band and will be improvising to their live music in concerts. This is what I intend to be the beginning of many performances with numerous jazz bands with my goal being to highlight dance as a necessary asset to the performance.

Through learning about the Black Arts Movement, I acquired knowledge about the meaning of improvisation in the black tradition, how artistic leaders such as Sun Ra used jazz music to elevate black consciousness, and the fact that improvisation reflected the way of life for the black community. I now realize that the work I want to do moving forward continues an

important legacy. I also have a greater understanding regarding the impact *physical listening* pedagogy can have on the subject of dance improvisation. As a result of this thesis, I hope to use *Free Form Body Motifs* to help enhance the understanding of musical bodies and to preserve the cultural influences of the Black Arts Movement in modern dance.

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Appendix: Thesis Concert Documentation

SUNDAY, MARCH 1 • 3 PM • PEM STUDIO

MFA Performance Lauren Putty White

Featuring live music by Sun Ra Arkestra's pianist, Farid Barron, and performances by dancers Joe Gonzalez and Sarah Warren

Viewers go on a journey inspired by the musician/composer and iconic figure of "black outerspace" Sun Ra, and original arrangements of his music, including covers of "A Train" and "Love in Outerspace." Live piano and piano synthesizer accompany the dancers on an improvisatory quest for unity in rhythm, melody, love, and community.

This is a MFA thesis concert in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Dance from Montclair State University.



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