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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

My Emerging Choreographic Identity Through the Work of Contemporary Black Dance Artists

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

In Dance

By

Marc Spaulding

Thesis Committee:
Associate Professor Chad Michael Hall, Chair
Associate Professor Dr. S. Ama Wray
Professor Alan Terricciano

2021

DEDICATION

To My Parents:

Michael T. Spaulding and Debra F. Carter

To My Brothers:

Michael L. Spaulding and Dwayne D. Carter II

To My Girlfriend:

Beverly Jane Bautista

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

My Emerging Choreographic Identity Through the Work of Contemporary Black Dance Artists

By

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Master of Fine Arts in Dance

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Associate Professor Chad Michael Hall, Chair

This thesis explores the intersection of African American heritage and creative process in concert dance choreography for contemporary black dance artists. I will examine how perceptions of blackness influence the spectrum of creative work produced by these artists. I investigate the historical engagement of 20th century black dance pioneers in concert dance, socio-political factors that influenced their work, and the notion of “Black Dance”. This research will then examine the cultural influences and work of five contemporary African American dance artists working in the field today. Lastly, I will reflect on my own creative process and create a multidisciplinary screendance titled *Intersections* filmed in the Experimental Media Performance Lab at UC Irvine. In this choreographic work, I illustrate my own perception of blackness and cultural influences, and I explore where I position myself in the continuum of black voices in contemporary dance.

INTRODUCTION

Upon entering high school, my mother insisted that I audition for the dance department at the prestigious Duke Ellington School of the Arts, in Washington, D.C. At the time of my audition, I had only taken one previous organized dance class which had not inspired me to pursue dance seriously. To my surprise, I was fortunate enough to be accepted into Ellington. Soon thereafter, I became completely immersed in concert-theatrical dance. In his book *The Black Tradition in American Dance*, author Richard A. Long distinguishes concert-theatrical dance from other forms of performance by stating:

There is a graduation of prestige among the types of dance performance available to today's public. Occupying the first rank, and comparable to other "serious" genres such as opera and legitimate theater, is the variety of dance, in ballet, modern and other idioms, which we designate concert-theatrical dance, offered by such companies as the New York City Ballet, the Martha Graham Dance Company, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater and various national folk dance companies (Long, 15).

My dance training at Ellington was a mixture of African diasporic dance forms (West African, Dunham, Jazz) and Eurocentric dance forms including Classical Ballet and Modern Dance. I received this training through an African American lens in an environment that celebrated and preserved the black American tradition in concert-theatrical dance.

After witnessing the artistic quality and exuberant spirit of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, my interests in dance and choreography deepened. What initially captured my attention as a child was the dancer's incredible athleticism, virtuosity, and stage presence. But after regularly viewing the repertory of many different professional American dance companies, especially those considered "Black Dance Companies" I realized that choreography can exhibit cultural awareness and demonstrate social change. I was also drawn to choreographic work in which black performers communicated their perception of blackness and the continuum of

African American heritage through their dancing bodies. For the context of this research, I am focusing on African American heritage as it pertains to dance. I am interested in the legacy, traditions, and conventions passed on by dance artists of African American descent. And, I am referring to blackness as relating to things: the quality or state of being black (in various senses).

As a young dance student, the transmission of African American heritage was imparted to me through dance classes, performances, mentorship, and participating in the creative process with professional black dance artists. After spending close to two decades pursuing my own professional dance career in the sectors of concert-theatrical dance, musical theatre, television, and film, I began graduate school in the fall of 2019. During my initial graduate experiences of research and exploration, I found myself naturally gravitating towards literature involving African Americans in concert-theatrical dance. This led me to question my own voice as a contemporary African American dance maker. Prior to this point, I dedicated the majority of my artistry to working in other people's creative process and communicating their artistic vision through the role of performer on stage and for camera.

The purpose of this thesis is to better understand the ramifications surrounding the intersection of African American heritage and the creative process in choreography for contemporary black choreographers that are creating work in today's concert dance field. My research questions are: What are some socio-political factors that influence the work of contemporary black dance artists? How is the perception of blackness manifested in their work? And where do I position myself in the continuum of black voices in contemporary dance?

METHODOLOGY

In order to thoroughly inform my research on African American heritage, blackness, and creative process in choreography for concert dance, I began my research by diving into a review of literature. This literature ranges from dance and performance studies, cultural studies, ethnic and racial studies, and psychology. In chapter one: *Historical Perspective*, I investigate the term Black Dance and analyze the historical access of western concert-theatrical dance for 20th century African American dance artists. I focus on the work of Hemsley Winfield, Edna Guy, Katherine Dunham, and Alvin Ailey and considered how these particular artists manifested blackness in their work. I also uncover the socio-political factors that influenced the development of their work.

The investigation of historical access for pioneering black dance artists in the first chapter creates a logical backdrop for the research in chapter two: *Today's Landscape of African American Artists*. In this chapter, I conducted field-work consisting of ethnographic interviews of five contemporary African American dance artists. The purpose of the interviews are to gather insight from five African American dance artists who are actively creating choreographic work in today's concert dance field. In addition, I also used these conversations to assist me in identifying the multiplicity of influences that most inform their work ranging from their training background to how these artists manifest the perception of blackness into their own creative process.

In chapter three: *Intersections*, I discuss my art making process. Utilizing my newfound knowledge from the review of literature, interviews with five professional concert dance choreographers, and my own written reflections, I use this material to construct a multidisciplinary screendance. This highly collaborative process includes eight undergraduate

UC Irvine Dance Majors. My process for selecting the dancers included my prior experience of working with two of the dancers on a previous school production and my personal observations of the other six dancers in joint classes and performances. Through the choreographic process, I explore how African American heritage informs my work as a black male artist. I was also able to assist the dancers in their own personal discoveries of how heritage informs their individual creative practices. Lastly, I utilize this process to analyze where I fit in the continuum of black voices in concert dance.

CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The purpose of this chapter is to gain a better understanding of the emergence of 20th century black dance artists in concert dance, analyze patronage and outside perceptions as specific socio-political factors that have impacted the production of work by black dance makers, and consider the term “Black Dance”. More specifically, this chapter will look at the career trajectories of Edna Guy, Hemsley Winfield, and Katherine Dunham to provide historical context on the emergence of black artists in concert dance. I also investigate the choreographic work of Alvin Ailey, in particular his seminal work *Revelations* as a means to analyze the term “Black Dance”.

Emergence of 20th Century Black Dance Artists

Dance historian, John O. Perpener III reminds us in his book *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*:

Aspiring black concert dancers and choreographers first became aware of contemporary developments in dance around the mid-1920s and began to assimilate the new dance expressions on the American stage. They soon made distinctive contributions to the development of concert dance in America, and, at the same time, they established their own traditions (Perpener, 2).

A noteworthy production that marks the beginning of black traditions in the American concert dance mainstream was the collaborative concert co-produced by Edna Guy and Hemsley Winfield. Dance historian Susan Manning states in her book *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* “On 29 April 1931 Edna Guy and Hemsley Winfield produced the first Negro Dance Recital in America at the intersection of the little theater movement in Harlem, leftist culture and the white dance establishment” (Manning, 30). Prior to this point many Negro dancers were only seen in theatrical productions such as black musicals and revues. Winfield who was an actor,

director turned dancer, choreographer created works in black theater, Broadway, the avant-garde theaters of Greenwich Village, and finally the Metropolitan Opera. (Perpener, 25). Guy who despite the racism of the time trained at the Denishawn school and toured with the company as a personal assistant before breaking with the company to pursue her own career (Manning, 3).

Winfield and Guy were a part of a community of young artists whose newly emerging consciousness focused on ways to develop new forms of black self-representation. Perpener asserts “these dancers wanted to take the essence of various black cultures into the American mainstream, but, at the same time, they realized that majority America did not consider the material they used artistically valuable in its own right” (Perpener, 23). Black artists also aimed to create work that associated them with new American trends of artistic expression- concert dance. The ambition to explore this notion is evident in Guy and Winfield’s decision to subtitle their concert “a programme of modern, primitive dances” (Manning, 32). Manning further details that the program included a range of dances from primitive themes, solos and duets, spirituals, and modern themes. Although Winfield’s career was cut short due to an early death and Guy was not able to achieve sustained success, Manning and Perpener suggest that both Guy and Winfield impacted the development of black concert dance in the 1930s.

Perpener suggests that Katherine Dunham was also looking to engage in modern trends and break from old traditions associated with vaudeville and musical theater. In quoting Dunham, Perpener states “a major goal was to attain a status in the dance world that will give the Negro dance student the courage really to study, and a reason to do so. And to take our dance out of the burlesque to make it a more dignified art” (Perpener, 18). In order to achieve greater artistic depth Perpener reminds us that: “Beginning in the early 1930s and using her training as an anthropologist, Dunham lived with, observed, and studied the dances of people in New World

black cultures” (Perpener, 129). In *The Black Tradition in American Dance*, language and arts

Scholar Richard A. Long states:

As a result of her research, Dunham distinguished three processes involving the African background of Black folk dance in the Western hemisphere. They are: the incorporation of African religious dance into new ritual behaviors; the secularization of African religious dance; and the interaction of African secular dance with European secular dance. Utilizing her gift for choreography, Dunham began the creation of compositions reflecting the varieties of Black folk dance she studied (Long, 63).

Dunham’s commitment to merging different cultural elements into modern dance styles,

specifically African and Caribbean elements was her signature aesthetic. Perpener states

“Dunham developed her dance technique like her choreography by synthesizing material from

African-American, European-American, and Afro-Caribbean dance forms” (Perpener, 155). She

sustained a long-lasting career and: as Perpener reminds us: “the significance of Katherine

Dunham’s career cannot be judged by her contributions in any single area of the dance arts”

(Perpener, 128).

Socio-Political Factors

By comparing viewership and funding opportunities for first generation Negro dance artist Edna Guy and first generation white modern dance artist Helen Tamiris the literature revealed how outside perceptions and patronage influenced the work of first-generation black dance artists.

In *Modern Dance, Negro Dance Race in Motion* author Susan Manning states:

Although modern dance and Negro dance emerged in tandem, the interrelated practices developed unevenly. This resulted partly from differences in patronage. While modern dancers managed to create a sustained network for training and production, this network extended few opportunities to Negro dancers. Hence Negro dancers had to improvise patronage of their own at the interstices of existing networks. This disparity in patronage in turn reflected stated and unstated assumptions about bodies in motion (Manning, 4).

One of the primary sources of patronage that black dance artists in the 1930s and 1940s relied on was the leftist dance network. Manning reminds us that this network fostered works with politically driven themes that targeted union workers, activist artists, and intellectuals as their primary audience. Within this network were different branches such as: the New Dance League, the Workers Dance League, and for a short period of time the Federal Theater Project. Manning claims although the leftist network provided production opportunities to black artists there was also a disadvantage to their support. She suggests that the network would only support the work of black artists if it fit into narrow parameters. In particular, they tended to steer black artists towards creating work based on African themes. In addition, Manning states “while the rhetoric of the left supported black self-representation, the practice of the left encouraged white voices and bodies to represent black subjects” (Manning, 60). In another passage she reaffirms this reality through the work and contemporary careers of white modern dance artist, Helen Tamiris and Negro dancer, Edna Guy. On 29 January 1928 Helen Tamiris premiered two dances set to spirituals, *Nobody Knows de Trouble I See* and *Joshua Fit de Battle ob Jericho* (Manning, 1). Tamiris is quoted in saying, “In these dances, I wanted to express the spirit of the Negro people-- in the first, his sense of oppression--in the second, his fight--and struggle and remembrance when ‘the walls came tumbling down’” (2). Manning declares that during this period critical advocates of modern dance often praised *Negro Spirituals* as exemplifying the integration of form and content that defined the modernism of the new genre (12). Moreover, she states Modern dancers did not mimic others but presented an abstraction or personification of others-- Oriental, Indian, Negro (10). Manning refers to this abstraction of subject matter by white modernists, as metaphorical minstrelsy. Three years after Tamiris premiered her first Negro Spiritual, Edna Guy choreographed and performed two spirituals, *Get on Board Little Chillun* and *Weeping Mary* (3).

Guy did not receive the multitude of support that Tamiris received from critics and the general public. In addition to having to improvise different combinations of financial support to produce their programs, Negro concert dancers received lackluster coverage from both the white and black press alike.

Guy's performance of *Negro Spirituals* was perceived as "rather simple," "too naive," and "pantomime pure" (37). Others such as John Martin from the *New York Times* proposed, Negro dancers should choreograph works that reveal qualities they associated with blackness, "forthrightness and simplicity" (35). Meanwhile the general consensus of the black press during the 1930's was that the innovations in African American dramatic theater were more worthy of mention than the innovations in African American concert dance (35). Many spectators assumed that black bodies in motion were naturally rhythmic and expressive and lacking in disciplined artistry, while white bodies in motion were artistically trained and hence intentionally expressive (4).

Black Dance

The term "Black Dance" has a contentious history. Scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild states in her book, *The Black Dancing Body* "This issue has been the subject of controversy and unease in the American concert dance world since the 1960s and has resurfaced every decade or so since then" (Gotschild,13). At the center of this controversy is the fact that black dance artists did not coin this phrase. Gottschild alludes to the fact that scholars believe it was a media phrase first developed by white dance writers who were responding to the civil rights advances of the times. She also suggests that many scholars and dance practitioners believe the term is limiting as it is a means to distinguish the work of black artists from their white counterparts.

Gottschild further establishes this point of view among black artists by quoting Alvin Ailey who states: “Is a work I do to Bach black just because I do it? I don’t think Blues Suites [1958] is a black dance. Four bars of it will be black, but what about the Cecchetti arms, all in the same phrase? I want very much not to be pegged” (Gottschild, 16). Ailey’s desire to not want to be “pegged” is noteworthy because as professor of African American Studies and author of *Dancing Revelations*, Thomas F. DeFrantz reminds us beginning in the 1960s into the new millennium Ailey and his company became the official bearer of black modern dance (DeFrantz, 69). So how did Ailey and his work become the standard of black modern dance? In looking at his seminal work *Revelations* DeFrantz states “for Ailey, Revelations realized the largely untapped potential of black dancers to inform concert dance with the profound cultural heritage of African American experience” (DeFrantz, 25). DeFrantz also explains that *Revelations* found success in encompassing white modern abstraction and black vernacular dance structures (DeFrantz, 22). In general, the literature demonstrates that a large part of Ailey’s success was his ability to attract a wide audience base in which he delivered universal themes through a black American lens.

The work of Gottschild and DeFrantz show us that while black artists may incorporate Africanist movement aesthetics and reference African American cultural themes into their work, the term black dance is largely based on perception and it is quite subjective.

CHAPTER TWO: TODAY'S LANDSCAPE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN DANCE ARTISTS

Overview

The literature in chapter one provided me with a better understanding of how 1st generation black dance artists emerged within 20th century concert dance, how outside perceptions and patronage affected the production of their work, and the roots of the term “black dance”. Being curious as to how these issues resonate today, I conducted interviews with five African American dance makers that are actively creating choreographic work in today’s concert dance field. The purpose of the interviews was to gather information from these artists that might shed light on the concerns that most inform their creative process, find common threads amongst their individual experiences, and better situate myself in the continuum of black voices in contemporary dance making.

Interviews

Through field-work consisting of live interviews, I selected five dance artists, Kyle Abraham, Darrell Grand Moultrie, Shamel Pitts, Hope Boykin, and Tommie-Waheed Evans. I selected these five dance makers for this study because of my familiarity with their choreographic work, they are my contemporaries, and my previous professional interactions with three of the artists. This criterion was essential to gaining access to the artists. Kyle Abraham is Artistic Director of American contemporary dance company Abraham. In. Motion (stylized as A.I.M). The goal of his movement is to explore identity in relation to a personal history. His choreographic focus on these topics made him an asset to this research. As a Princess Grace

Award recipient, Darrell Grand Moultrie has created a wide range of works in both concert dance and theater. His diverse experiences especially in the field of ballet, which has historically limited the access of African Americans made him a key contributor to this research. Shamel Pitts is the artistic director and founder of TRIBE, a New York based multidisciplinary arts collective. His creative works use the lens of choreography, dance, and multidisciplinary arts to color landscapes that are celebratory of black people. Pitts' exploration in blackness through the use of different artistic mediums added great value to this study. As a dance-maker and choreographer, Hope Boykin has created works for prominent concert dance companies and universities throughout the United States including her own company, *HopeBoykinDance*. Her extensive work with several pioneering black dance artists and companies translated to valuable insight that was pertinent to this research. Tommie-Waheed Evans is a 2021 Guggenheim Fellowship recipient. His creative work explores blackness, spirituality, queerness, and liberation. The focus of Evans choreographic work also made him a valuable asset to this study.

The artists' ages range from 36-49 which puts my age in the median of the cohort. This established a good representation of artists that were older and younger than me. It also allowed for commonality and a similar perspective regarding the research. I have worked with the majority of these artists in some professional capacity. In particular, Evans and I spent three years dancing together as company members of The Philadelphia Dance Company (*PHILADANCO*). As an undergraduate student at University of the Arts, Boykin was a frequent guest teacher and mentor of mine. During my time performing as a freelance dance artist, I had the opportunity to work with Moultrie on two separate occasions. As a cohort all five artists have strong roots within east coast concert dance culture, as do I. Having shared experiences and similar training backgrounds was crucial to keeping the research focused.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic all of the interviews were conducted over the Zoom video and audio communications platform from October of 2020 to January 2021. Each interview consisted of a forty-five minute to sixty-minute time block. In order to highlight the common threads most pertinent to this research, the artist's responses were organized into four themes; Spectrum of Choreographic Work, Manifesting Blackness, Outside Perceptions/Funding, and Black Dance. The following summarizes the observations by theme. For a complete list of the interview questions please refer to Appendix A.

Spectrum Of Choreographic Work

In the interviews, each artist shared their individual approach to creating movement. Hope Boykin suggests that the spectrum of works that she produces may not appear to be broad but she is specific. Boykin provides further clarification in stating, "I am a Horton-based choreographer, who was classically trained." Boykin further asserts "I have a cadence that I speak in" and a specific "movement-language" (a term that Boykin uses to describe her movement vocabulary). Another artist that speaks of creating within specific parameters is Tommie-Waheed Evans. In our discussion, Evans explains that right now, he is interested in what he calls a few "central things". In particular, Evans is currently exploring spirituality and religion, as he further explains, "because I have the background that comes from the black church." In terms of movement aesthetic, Evans declares that Contemporary Ballet, African, and the "groove" of Hip Hop are all represented inside of his work (in some way). Evans explains that he generally tries to stay within those central things as it is important to him to continue to deepen his vernacular. Evan's declaration to continuously deepen his vernacular is in-line with Boykin's assertion about having a specific "movement-language" that she speaks in.

Conversely Darrell Grand Moultrie says “I try my best to keep it as diverse as possible.” He credits his 3rd grade Harlem public school teacher for her mentorship and exposing him to dance, music, opera, and theatre. Moultrie expressed that he does not want to be labeled and the spectrum of his work could go anywhere from classical ballet, contemporary ballet, modern, post-modern, and African. It is worth noting that Moultrie’s comment about not wanting to be labeled echo the same sentiment as Gottschild’s quote of Alvin Ailey in the previous chapter. When asked to describe the spectrum of creative work that he produces, Abraham replied with, “I always refer to it as a postmodern gumbo.” It is important to note the plethora of other elements that find their way inside of Abraham’s choreographic “gumbo” including his upbringing, dance education in both traditional and codified dance forms, his interest in experimental concepts, and his roots in hip-hop culture. The fifth artist, Shamel Pitts, describes himself as a multidisciplinary artist whose works are largely inspired by the movement of Afrofuturism, which he describes as a philosophy, a way of living, and a way of creating. While further discussing his work, Pitts asserts “Although dance is the body and blood of the work, all of the other collaborators and mediums that I use in my work are highly pronounced”. Although it’s a small sample size the research gathered from the five interviews suggests that the spectrum of work being created by today’s African American artists is broad.

Manifesting Blackness

A common thread and point of emphasis in these conversations has been how blackness manifests in the choreographic work of these African American artists. In discussing this topic with the interviewees Abraham had this to say in referencing his choreographic work, “It’s always going to be black, even in its most abstracted form.” Abraham, who admittedly creates a

lot of work dealing with social commentary that reflects the times, further states, “making work for me is in a lot of ways showing who I am and showing my community, especially in a group work.” Abraham’s comments suggest that black representation is an important factor in his work. Multidisciplinary artist Pitts states that with *TRIBE*, his performance collective, he is interested in collecting a large variety of black artists to share more forwardly their humanity through art. Adding to this thought, he says “I say that my work has a lot to do with the colorfulness within blackness.” Pitts’ comments reflect his desire to use his creative work to highlight the multiplicity that exists within blackness. As he explains, its often easy to put us into a category rather than allow us to be multiple. During my conversation with Evans, he had this to say “I’m dealing with blackness, even when I’m choreographing to straight classical music, I’m not saying that this is a social injustice piece or this is a spiritual piece, I still feel like there’s a representation of blackness that appears”. While expanding on his thoughts, Evans suggests that the way he responds to rhythm and the tendency for his movement to overflow with spirit enables his blackness to become visible in his work. He further asserts “I don’t think you can mute that”. In my conversation with Boykin, she provided a different perspective on the matter. She states “I never thought I needed to remind people that I am black through my work”. Boykin further explained that although her cultural influences and black dance influences are rich, she does not create work based on her heritage. She asserts “I am just a woman; a black woman and I make dances”. Boykin’s point of view added a varying perspective on this topic. In discussing this matter with Moultrie, he also suggested that manifesting blackness in his work is innate. He states “I can’t help it; I could be at ballet company and a step or rhythm comes up that is clearly from where I was raised”. Moultrie also expressed the idea that throughout his career, he has tried to effectively balance his codified training with his cultural influences.

Black Dance

As the literature has shown from the previous chapter, the term black dance is quite subjective and continuously changing. But for continuity of this study, it was important to understand how the five artists felt about this topic. In my conversation with Evans, he first acknowledged the history of the term as being developed by people outside of the black culture. However, he also believes that some black artists lean into the reductive idea of what the term has meant historically while other black artists are pushing the boundaries and redefining what the term might mean in today's dance climate. In her opinion, Boykin states the term was regarded as a celebration of expression by black dance makers. And this expression was normally perceived as being based on struggle and rejoicing. However, Boykin believes the definition has changed some. She feels that black dance in its current iteration is a dance made by black artists that respects the African diaspora. During my conversation with Abraham his answer was concise and fairly straight forward. He believes black dance to be dances made by black artists that are inspired by black culture. During my conversation with Pitts, he states "I would say lindy hop is black dance, jazz is black dance. These dance styles are from here, created by black people". Another interesting thought that Pitts shared was his belief that black dance is often defined through the lens of a white construct. More specifically, he suggests that people often define it as a movement style that is a derivative of both ballet and modern dance. The last artist to address this topic was Moultrie. During our conversation, he states "I don't think black dance is a thing". Moultrie further explains, I believe it refers more to the way you approach movement and how the audience responds to the dance. It is important to note that Moultrie also made reference to social dancing in the black culture as being the root of black dance.

Outside Perceptions/ Funding

It would appear that contemporary African American choreographers are receiving more opportunities to create work in concert dance spaces as compared to 1st generation black choreographers. However, it was pertinent to this research to gain a better understanding of how outside perceptions affect the production of contemporary black artists working in today's dance field. When asked if he feels pressure to create a certain type of work, Abraham stated:

I do. Yeah, I feel like I've always really made a lot of work that in a lot of ways was a social commentary kind of really reflecting on the time, etc. But if I were to ever try to make something that differed from that, I don't know if that's even allowed for me, which is really precarious. There's new found advocacy for artists of color not only black artists, the whole kind of BIPOC community. I feel like we're still the only ones asked about how we feel making dances in the height of [a] kind of post [-] George Floyd murder.

Abraham's comments were further substantiated by Pitts. When asked about this matter he echoed a similar sentiment in saying:

These foundations are seeing us now. And they kind of have to see us and they have to give us opportunities. So, I think that has shifted. It's still strange because I think you have to talk about equity, equality, and inclusion.

Pitts made it clear that equity, equality, and inclusion are important issues to him, but if funding opportunities for black dance artists are solely based on these ideas it can be limiting in terms of the type of work that is produced. Moreover, Pitts asserts that these funding opportunities for black artists may be funneled towards white guilt. In my conversation with Moultrie, he acknowledged that this topic can be heavy politically for African American dance artists. He stated:

Why can't I just create dance? Why, do I have to always fill out a grant. And the grant has too always be about. I'll get the money if I talk about the hardship of growing up in the hood. Why can't I just say I want to make a dance where dancers feel free. You

know, so I do think sometimes we do get pushed into a corner where we feel like we have to do certain work.

It should be noted that both Moultrie and Pitts talked about the idea of not feeling like they can just create a dance without having a heavy subject matter attached to it. In my conversation with Evans, he also acknowledged that he feels outside pressure to make a certain type of work. When asked to expound on this thought Evans discussed the idea of not wanting to feel like he can only apply for grants and funding opportunities that are responding to social injustice issues. He was adamant about his position on this topic as he further asserts “that’s problematic and I don’t want to do that”. In contrast Boykin stated that she does not feel pressure to create a certain type of work. She further asserts “I have my own lane”. Boykin was also adamant about not allowing others to determine what type of work she creates.

In conclusion, the findings of this chapter have many parallels with chapter one. Like Alvin Ailey and many of the other pioneering black dance artists of the previous generation contemporary black artists desire very much not to be pigeonholed by stereotypes and outside perceptions. Moreover because of advances in American society contemporary black artists seem to have more opportunities to create in concert dance spaces that were traditionally not designed for them. However there seems to be new challenges that exists in terms of the type of work contemporary black artists feel they have to make to receive maximum funding opportunities. Lastly, the term black dance seems to be a construct that is being redefined and reimagined by today’s black concert dance artists.

CHAPTER THREE: INTERSECTIONS

The ideas drawn from my synthesis at the conclusion of chapters 2 points me in the direction of how to contextualize my own work. By foregrounding the development of my interest in multidisciplinary screendance I address the intersection of African American heritage and the creative process in concert dance choreography for contemporary black dance artists. Coming into this choreographic project, I intentionally selected a diverse group of dancers. I did not feel it was necessary to only cast African American dancers in the work. My creative impulse was to bring together the best group of collaborators possible. I believe my identity as an African American is the thread that connects all of my collaborators to the material. My intention was to use the research as an entry point into the development of the work. I saw an opportunity to use the themes of personal background and African American heritage as those points of entry. In the creative process, I wanted the dancers to investigate how their personal background and racial heritage influences them as dance artists. With that information, I created a work that gave the dancers space to share their background, perspective, and heritage. Ultimately, I wanted to create an intersection between my background and theirs. My decision to use the vibrant jazz music track *Hot Music* by artist Pal Joey was largely inspired by nostalgia. It was a popular song choice in many underground hip hop and house clubs during the 90s and early 2000s. Because Hip hop culture is rooted in African American heritage and blackness it had a significant influence on me during my upbringing. In staying in the spirit of hip hop, I also chose to incorporate the medium of graphic design into the film. I felt the addition of artwork would support the creative concept and tone of the movement. In deciding what type of artwork to implement into the film, I chose to use paintings by artists Jean-Michel Basquiat and Jackson Pollock as sources of inspiration to create original artwork. As a black man of mixed heritage, Basquiat created many works of art

that spoke to the social condition of black Americans. However, I gravitated more to the street art aesthetic that is highly visible in his work. My attraction to Pollock's artwork was also motivated by aesthetic and his usage of vibrant colors that create a sense of movement. After establishing a clear creative concept, I was ready to dive into the choreographic process.

The Choreographic Process

Traditionally I have approached the choreographic process in a manner where I create the majority of the movement while asking the dancers to take in the information and execute it according to my vision. Because I was asking the dancers to reflect on their own upbringing and heritage, I thought it was necessary to create a much more collaborative environment for the dancers and I to work in. In following university health and safety mandates all rehearsals were conducted via the zoom video and audio communications platform. To maximize time, effort, and energy, I rehearsed with each dancer individually for one and a half hours per week until the final stages of development in which I held one group zoom rehearsal for three hours. I strategically devised a plan to use the first meeting with each dancer to engage them in conversation. After sharing with them my research interests in African American heritage, perception of blackness, and the creative process in concert dance choreography, I was pleased to find that they were open and willing to dive into the process. Many of the dancers expressed to me that they had never thought about how their personal heritage or background influences them as dance artists. Over the course of our brief but impactful four-week rehearsal period we routinely began each rehearsal with a reflection and discussion. Once I gathered more information about their personal background, heritage, and cultural influences I used this information to guide the dancers through structured improvisational exercises. From there, we

were able to develop specific solos and small phrases that best represent each dancer. To more deeply place the movement within the research, I organized the choreography into four separate sections: *Introduction*, *Groove*, *Cool Waves*, and *Vitality*. As the title suggests the *introduction solos* were meant to establish each dancer within the piece. My vision for this section was based on a concept that cultural studies scholar Luana calls individual stylization- profiling. In her book *What Makes That Black?* Luana states:

the performer demonstrates individuality within the context of the group performance. During this stylization, the artist develops signature sound, phrasing, movement, or approach to art-making; he or she also develops an identity that celebrates the self (Luana, 19).

In *Groove*, I taught all of the dancers the same choreographic phrase then I instructed them to repeat the phrase, modify the musical phrasing, and order of steps. This section was guided by the process of repetition and riffing. Luana defines this concept as “short phrases that reoccur in a driving or pulsing manner” (Luana, 23). For *Cool Waves*, the major theme was improvisation. I gave each dancer a specific movement task to guide their improvisation including: initiating all of your movement using your upper body, initiating all of your movement using your lower body, keeping all of your movement stationary, and executing all of your movement while covering vast amounts of space. In the last section *Vitality*, I wanted to create a section based on a term that scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild calls *epebism*. “This principal encompasses attributes such as power, vitality, flexibility, drive, and attack” (Gottschild, 15). Considering all of the limitations that we were facing in this process; I was pleased with what we were able to create.

Filming

Once the choreographic process was complete, I quickly prepared to move into the Experimental Media Performance Lab at UC Irvine to begin filming my screendance. In accordance with my back-to-campus proposal which I had to submit to gain access to the theater, I was given a six-day window to film (Sunday, April 18, 2021 through Friday, April 23, 2021). Prior to entering the theater, I met with my director of photography to go over the shot list. During our virtual meeting we discussed how we could capture the various angles and shots that I envisioned, but we also agreed to leave enough room in the filming for impromptu shots that may add value to the overall film. This foresight in preparation proved to be useful. On our first day in the theater was a dry-tech day. My production team and I used the allotted time to hang and focus lights, get accustomed to using the video projection technology, lay Marley flooring down in the designated dance area, and record practice video shots in the space to address any potential camera issues. It was during these practice shots that my "DP" and I realized that we needed to re-evaluate how we were planning to film in the space. Instead of shooting the dance in a traditional theatrical manner by disguising the off-stage fixtures, we decided to incorporate these fixtures into the film. By using the stage lighting trees, audio speakers, railings, and lighting board to foreground and background certain shots, it gave the film more creative possibilities. In terms of shoot schedule, we used days 2-4 to film the dancers. In order to meet all of the health and safety requirements and have the appropriate amount of time to capture all eight dancers, my stage manager and I devised the following schedule:

- 5 - 5:30pm Set up space
- 5:30 - 7pm Film Dancer (1)
- 7 - 7:50pm Sanitize/Break

- 7:50 - 9:20pm Film Dancer (2)
- 9:20 - 10pm Strike for the Night
- 10pm End of Day

During the last day of my shoot none of the dancers were called as we used only a portion of the time to capture B-roll footage for editing purposes. Although I have self-produced other projects in the past, this project reminded me of how much time, energy, and hard work it takes to self-produce your own project.



Reviewing artwork for the cyclorama



First day in the theater/ tech rehearsal

Collaboration

The most essential part of the creative project was collaborating with my cast of dancers, stage manager, lighting designer, director of photography, graphic designer, and sound designer. Using the knowledge on artistic collaboration that I gained in my first-year graduate class- *Lighting for Choreography*, I approached each of these partnerships with clear communication and flexibility. Furthermore, I wanted to make sure my artistic vision was clearly articulated while also giving each individual collaborator enough room in the creative process to contribute their own artistry for the betterment of the project. In terms of my individual working relationships with each person, I was in constant communication with them all, especially my SM. As I mentioned in the pre-production section, stage management was the first position I filled. I felt comfortable working with this individual because they came highly recommended by a trusted colleague of mine. Being that this was a small production team and we had minimal time to produce everything the reality was, I was going to need my SM to assist me with multiple

tasks that might be traditionally outside the scope of what that position normally requires. Thankfully my SM was more than up for the challenge. From the time I hired them in February to the end of the production process in April, they completed an array of tasks for me including drafting emails, scheduling rehearsals and production call sheets, contacting relevant personnel, and even assisting me with laying down marley flooring. In working with my lighting designer, the degree of separation was much smaller. Thanks to that same *Lighting for Choreography* class, I worked with this individual on two previous projects. Once they committed to my thesis project, we had an initial virtual meeting in which I described my vision to them. From there, I sent them a color palette and the names of the sections within the piece-vitality, groove, and cool waves. With this information they were able develop an initial mood board. After inviting the LD to additional dance rehearsals and continually discussing new developments within the choreographic work we were able to finalize a set lighting design. Once we moved into the theater for our dry tech, I was able to view all of the lighting cues. I was pleased to find that there were very few tweaks that needed to be made. The work that the LD contributed to the project was fantastic. My desire to work with a graphic designer was inspired by two smaller projects that I created in my UC Irvine graduate choreography class. In these separate assignments, I used the artwork of Jean-Michel Basquiat and Jackson Pollock as entry points to produce two dance solos. Seeing the end result of these two works prompted me to incorporate this medium in my thesis project. My thought process for selecting the best person to create artwork for my thesis was based on who I had access to and my familiarity with their work. Fortunately, I was able to hire a multi-talented dancer and graphic designer who recently graduated from UC Irvine's dance program. In order to continue building continuity within the piece, I gave the GD the same sources of inspiration (color palette and keywords), to help guide the creation of their designs.

The end result was four main images to represent each section of the piece and two additional variations per image. My collaboration with the sound designer started during the rehearsal process. Through our various forms of communication and sending them video clips of the dance rehearsals they produced a new rendition of the original composition that maintained the essence of the original track while supporting the dance in a more complete manner. My collaboration with the director of photography was two-fold. They not only filmed the dance but also edited the final video. Our communication was constant from the beginning of the rehearsal process, through filming, and into the editing phase. Something that we talked about in the editing was finding ways to express the concept of intersection even in the most abstract ways. To reiterate, I was extremely pleased with all facets of my collaborations and I believe they added great value to the overall quality of the project.

CONCLUSION

Black artists will continue to debate the extent to which they should or should not be expected to include material that foregrounds their racial heritage in their work; they will debate the efficacy of creating art that serves the political and social needs of their people (Perpener, 223).

As a black dance artist that is still exploring the true depth of his choreographic identity, the forementioned quote by dance historian John O. Perpener III resonates with me. Prior to engaging in this creative process, I did not consider how movement that reflects my African American heritage might inform my work. Moreover, I regrettably took these cultural markers for granted. As an African American male dance artist who essentially grew up in a very specific black dance culture and has spent the majority of his life as a professional dance practitioner, I was comfortable falling back on the experience of “doing” and learning through being immersed in physical practice. Many of my works prior to this thesis did not involve this level of creative investigation. These works were primarily driven by an unconscious creative inspiration to simply dance and not examine where the ideas were rooted.

My research journey began by simply questioning how my artistic background influences my choreography as a contemporary dance maker. I questioned whether or not my creative work was divergent from my training background. This curiosity transformed this research into a more meaningful investigation of how African American heritage and the portrayal of blackness as defined by Luana pertain to concert dance choreography. Through this process, I have discovered a greater appreciation for research as a way to inform and expand my practice. Although I am still not as comfortable researching outside of the studio as I am inside of it, I now have footing where there was previously none and from here, I will continue to explore. The practice of searching for the “why” and “how” has been a tremendous help to me and I envision

it will continue to serve me well in the future as I plan to be more intentional about grounding my work in a more meaningful creative process. Through reviewing the literature, I gained more insight on how specific socio-political factors including: outside perceptions, patronage, and the term black dance have historically affected the production of work by black dance artists. By conducting interviews with the five professional dance artists, I discovered how the factors resonating with black dance artists that are creating work in today's concert dance field are also within me. Through the filming and production process, I was able to illustrate my own perception of blackness and the continuum of African American heritage.

Through this research I learned that there continues to be certain societal pressures that impel upon the type of work black artists should create. However, I plan to continue to explore how I can authentically create work that speaks to all aspects of who I am as an artist and human. A significant part of that is my identity as an African American male. I understand that my artistic voice is invaluable because it is unique to my personal experience but it is also intrinsically a part of the black American experience. Therefore, I believe it is my responsibility to continue to share my work with explicit recognition of my lineage so that I may positively and dynamically contribute to the multiplicity that exists within black voices in contemporary dance.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Instrument

How would you describe the spectrum of creative works you produce?

How does your background manifest itself in your career, specifically your upbringing, dance training, and mentors?

How would you describe the range of work being produced by today's black concert dance choreographers?

Does your ethnicity and or racial identity influence your creative works? If so, how?

Are there any global issues outside of dance that influence your work?

Do you feel pressure as an African American artist to create a specific type of work?

From your perspective what is the current climate of concert dance for black choreographers, specifically considering: funding opportunities, presenting opportunities, and how the work gets made?

How are you working to build your audience? Who are you trying to reach with your work?

APPENDIX B

Artwork

To request access to the artwork, contact Marc Spaulding at mcpauld@uci.edu.

APPENDIX C

Intersections Screendance

To view the *Intersections* please click here: <https://vimeo.com/548297161>