

Dance Dialogues

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Abstract:

This article focuses on the development of a theoretical framework for jazz dance in which researchers hypothesized how motif notation concepts from Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) and Language of Dance® (LOD) could be used to help learners understand how the roots and branches of jazz dance styles are related. We began by investigating the Africanist aesthetics of jazz dance to better grasp how each element influences the feel of jazz as it exists within various jazz dance styles. To differentiate between the styles, we deciphered how the Africanist aesthetics blend with Europeanist aesthetics and movement vocabulary to merge into a variety of distinctly American dance forms. Notation-based dance theory offers a unique lens for analytical observation that helps to support theory discussion surrounding the essence of jazz as it is felt in the body. The Africanist aesthetic framework we created provides conceptual tools for comprehending the scope of jazz dance and a movement analysis perspective that might contribute to social, concert, and commercial or entertainment research. We hope this framework proves useful to others in their jazz inquiries by offering fertile conceptual ground for jazz dance research and pedagogical development within academic and artistic practices.

Keywords: dance | American dance | Laban Movement Analysis | jazz dance | jazz music | dance notation

Article:

This new article format within JODE grew out of a request to respond to one of the articles we published in our January-March 2019 issue. Although we have not previously printed such responses, the Editorial Board agreed that the idea had merit, particularly if the authors of the original article had a chance to reply to the response, creating a dialogue. This dialogue's topic is particularly timely, since it deals with race within dance. Race in dance education has been on the minds of many within dance education over the recent past, as evidenced by the JODE's 2020 Special Issue, *Race and Dance Education*, as well as the many sessions on race at the NDEO 2019 conference, and the addition of the new NDEO board position for Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Access (IDEA).

The crux of the commentary by Crystal Davis, Susan Koff, and Selene Carter focuses on the idea that since jazz dance has its roots in African dance, and Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) is a European-based analysis system, it is not appropriate to use LMA to analyze jazz dance. Teresa Heiland and Beth Megill, authors of the original article, respond that among other things, LMA can be a starting point for analyzing jazz dance and an alternative to discussing jazz in the language of ballet.

As a memory assist for readers, the abstract for the article, published in issue 19–1, is included here:

Africanist Aesthetics, Jazz Dance, and Notation Walk into a Barre by Teresa Heiland and Beth

Abstract

This article focuses on the development of a theoretical framework for jazz dance in which researchers hypothesized how motif notation concepts from Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) and Language of Dance® (LOD) could be used to help learners understand how the roots and branches of jazz dance styles are related. We began by investigating the Africanist aesthetics of jazz dance to better grasp how each element influences the feel of jazz as it exists within various jazz dance styles. To differentiate between the styles, we deciphered how the Africanist aesthetics blend with Europeanist aesthetics and movement vocabulary to merge into a variety of distinctly American dance forms. Notation-based dance theory offers a unique lens for analytical observation that helps to support theory discussion surrounding the essence of jazz as it is felt in the body. The Africanist aesthetic framework we created provides conceptual tools for comprehending the scope of jazz dance and a movement analysis perspective that might contribute to social, concert, and commercial or entertainment research. We hope this framework proves useful to others in their jazz inquiries by offering fertile conceptual ground for jazz dance research and pedagogical development within academic and artistic practices.

Commentary: “Africanist Aesthetics, Jazz Dance, and Notation Walk into a Barre”

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Reading “Africanist Aesthetics, Jazz Dance, and Notation Walk into a Barre” resulted in a visceral reaction that provoked a deeper examination. This article uses Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) as a lens to analyze forms of jazz dance. It begins with the premise that jazz dance is based on Africanist esthetics as defined by Robert Ferris Thompson () and discussed more currently by Brenda Dixon Gottschild (). The article justifies using LMA as a language to clarify concepts of Africanist esthetics as “assimilated and appropriated” into jazz. Clarifying jazz through Africanist esthetics does not justify doing this analysis through the lens of LMA. Clarifying a dance genre or cultural esthetic through the frame of another cultural esthetic is not a clarifying but rather a dialogic exchange. This may bring into focus some aspects of the dance while obscuring other

elements. What is problematic is that what is considered clarifying in one cultural orientation may obscure what is important to the culture within which the form was created. First, this commentary will discuss how Africanist esthetics and LMA are skewed in this article. Second, we will go deeper into the LMA process and what it reveals.

In order to place ourselves as respondents to the article, we offer our positionality. The lead author listed is an African-American Certified Laban-Bartenieff Movement Analyst through the Integrated Movement Studies program who has studied, performed, and taught jazz for over fifteen years. Her perspective on applying an LMA lens to non-European movement forms is that LMA should not be seen as a leading authority, system, or expert in these instances, but instead as an equitable partner with which to dialogue across cultural contexts for deeper cross-cultural understanding. The second respondent is a dance educator with over thirty years' experience in higher education and more than twenty years working directly with teacher certification candidates. As a white woman, she is cognizant of the privilege it has provided in her career and she works to address the privileged position that Western dance forms have taken in the education of our future educators. In addressing and trying to right what she recognizes as a skewed perspective, she advocates that nothing is universal or neutral and we mistakenly fall into inadvertent traps when trying to operate in this fashion. LMA is a perspective with a Western lens and should be used with that always in mind. The third respondent is an artist-scholar with white privilege addressing white supremacy in her dance lineage and practices. Her position is that LMA as a conceptual framework may articulate a mover's experience, yet if LMA is presented as an essentialist system applied to any form, it risks occluding the primogenitors of cultural embodiments such as jazz.

Africanist Aesthetics

Reviewing ten Africanist esthetics from Thompson (), the article analyzes seven of these through the LMA framework. This creates an imbalance that alters the holism of his system of esthetics. Thompson asserts that the Western perspective language we use is inappropriate and instead encourages the reader to develop an inside perspective to perceive African art. The article in question claims that the analysis engages "cognitive, affective and psychomotor experiences of jazz dance to support our understanding" (11) yet those divisions are also a Western perspective. Without the voices of experts in cultural context of the esthetic, Eurocentric categorizations such as LMA mute what must be primary in understanding Africanist forms. LMA could be used to compare and identify personal perspectives between cultures, and in future writings we hope to address these possibilities.

Laban Movement Analysis

This article is an example of how the analysis of jazz forms reveals as much about the observer's perspective as the Africanist forms. While the article claims the process of analysis clarifies the essence of jazz forms mentioned, Laban scholar/practitioner Carol-Lynne Moore and psychologist/educator Kaoru Yamamoto () assert that observer-analysts are moving toward abstraction and framing the object of perception to the exclusion of other elements. Frames focus on some aspects specific to the observer-analyst's culture and personal experiences, while obscuring other cultural perspectives. Without dialogue privileging the historic and living experts of the dance form within its cultural context and esthetic, their lives and voices are silenced.

Deconstructing movement through symbolic notation systems privileges Western abstraction and what the article calls “literacy.” While this is one way to perceive and understand a dance form, we argue it does not deepen learning if a dance form is affixed to the values of abstraction and literacy. Assigning terminology and abstracting movement concepts is not the orientation by which all forms of movement cohere. There are dance forms that do not privilege the participant’s analysis of the form but rather the participant’s embodiment of it. Because the Africanist esthetic is not of the same cultural context as LMA, the analysis is a Eurocentric perception, not truth or clarification of how jazz dance is an Africanist esthetic form.

Ascribing categories of one cultural orientation to phenomena of another cultural orientation reifies stereotypes of the observed cultural form (Banaji and Greenwald). For example, the analysis provided in the article that includes both ephebism and “the predatory animal stance we see in much jazz dance” (14) may be as indicative of the stereotypical, historical remnants of how African American dance forms have been viewed in the U.S. as it is about the movement itself. Cultural context provided may resonate with those of a similar perspective but may also be tied to implicit biases that ascribe child-like and animalistic tropes to Africanist esthetics present in the jazz forms.

Summary and Recommendations

We have awareness of past mistakes of colonialism within dance education (Buck and Meiners) to “overcome the limitations of our differences” (Shapiro , 272). If we continue to solely present the Eurocentric lens, we will not “decolonize the curriculum” (McCarthy-Brown). Applying LMA to Thompson’s theory () to notate forms of jazz dance reduces fundamental roots of jazz to a Eurocentric dance form, which it is not. It assumes a lack of clarity in the embodiment of the Africanist esthetic in jazz that the colonial practice of deconstructing, analyzing, and abstracting purports to solve. Those learning to embody the essence of jazz if coupled with an analysis of it through a Eurocentric lens will model practices of colonial erasure of Africanist esthetics. Instead, we propose inviting experts steeped in the Africanist esthetic to the class to share the pertinent aspects of how esthetics manifest in jazz.

Implicit biases are unspoken and unconscious. To interrupt these patterns, we suggest privileging knowledge present in the cultures of the dance forms studied as more critical to understanding. With deep listening and acknowledgment of different forms of knowledge, students learn to make meaning from their own experiences rather than ascribe a particular analytical lens to an embodied experience.

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Response to Commentary by Davis, Koff, and Carter

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We respect the responders' ideas and are reminded that, as movement analysts and educators, we must work with sensitivity when discussing all dance forms. The six faculty members involved in this project were threatened by administrators wanting to remove jazz from our curricula in higher education. Administrators had said that they might not offer jazz dance courses any longer because in Los Angeles students can study jazz in local studios. We fought for jazz dance by exploring the richness across the styles, using analysis via embodiment and multiple dance languages. Because we find higher education to value verbal clarity, we strove to increase the clarity of the jazz-specific, cognitive content in our classes. In doing so, we hoped to disprove the stereotype of jazz not being worthy of study in higher education.

We have noticed that our students enter college with an essentialized understanding of jazz dance; they use ballet terms, their primary language, to describe jazz experiences. We believe jazz dance in academia risks being cut from programs if we cannot discuss the learning beyond what dancers seem to have already experienced in studios. We know that embodied knowledge is a form of literacy. If jazz dance styles can be understood only by a few "experts steeped in Africanist aesthetics," which the responders implied, and if "there are dance forms that do not privilege the participant's analysis of the form, but rather the participant's embodiment of it," then the responders themselves are essentializing jazz dance, because they are claiming that jazz can only be understood by a few experts, and not from trusting our own embodied experiences of jazz. All dance forms must be understood and felt through the body, but we would be doing a disservice to jazz dance education if we represented ourselves as people who can do, but who cannot describe what we do. By improving our language, we were fighting the battle before us, the battle of exclusion.

Unless we can theorize embodied understanding, we cannot support our students to carry the discussion forward, and they will likely continue to talk about jazz dance forms using ballet vocabulary. Our goals for jazz – to be valued and understood for itself and not in relationship to

something else – are desired by those who teach jazz dance in academia. We entered into our exploration using a literature review followed by movement analysis; however, we could have easily also used qualitative analysis, interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, or participant observation. Each research method would provide different insights.

To organize a diverse array of jazz concepts on paper, we used shorthand tools—Motif notation from Language of Dance® (LOD), Laban Movement Analysis (LMA), and Doris Green’s Greenotation (designed to examine sub-Saharan African drum and dance traditions)—to capture our embodied understanding and felt experiences. These analytical tools provide ways to translate felt experiences into spoken and written word, and the resultant concepts in notation. While tools capture how we see and feel, they may also signal that any system used might not accurately represent what is experienced. When limitations occur, movement analysts have the responsibility to create new ways of notating concepts that reify the spoken language by using knowledge gained during embodied research.

By publishing our embodied, felt experiences in a thorough and analytical document, we shared our commitment to jazz dance as a form of embodied inquiry. The resulting diagrams were presented for further discussion among our scholarly community. If we were to decide that we still cannot discover and discuss jazz in its various forms using the available tools of LOD and LMA, then we also essentialize jazz dance by choosing not to develop a language sensitive enough to capture the myriad of experiences had while dancing jazz. When we hesitate to develop new languages to discuss dance, we, as a community, essentialize any dance form, relegating it to “off limits” status to all but the experts. This inaction tends to reduce the voice of the members of a community.

Other disciplines also start with available tools and improve as they go. For example, people use Zeami Motokiyo’s theories to best understand Japanese Noh; Bharata Muni’s theories to best understand the Natya-Sastra; Aristotle’s Poetics to best understand Greek tragedy. While applying Zeami Motokiyo’s theories to Sanskrit theater does a disservice to understanding and discussing Sanskrit theater, it provides a platform from which to start a discussion. As skilled LOD and LMA users who live with jazz in our bodies, minds, and spirits, we use the tools we have to understand the blend of dance forms that we feel, live, and know, and we continue to develop tools to more accurately talk about jazz dance. We encourage our jazz colleagues to create ways for us to have shared languages so that we can continue to grow jazz literacy and learn together.

While in some ways it might seem protective to say that jazz should not be analyzed, we are concerned that it does a disservice to jazz by saying it can only be understood when we are in the process of doing it in the presence of a few experts. Our nation is too large to be able to bring experts to every jazz classroom. It is our job in academia to support language and discussion, or we relegate any dance form to being something that is considered “well and good enough” to be studied outside of academe.

Our approach is not the only one possible, but we must recognize that language is power in academia. Our tables and charts were framed as artifacts to reveal to administrators that jazz cannot be relegated as “other.” Jazz dance is woven into almost every American dance form, so it deserves deep study. To continue growing together to understand jazz in our huge nation, it seems it would be constructive to have discussions about jazz styles using a modified and inclusive Delphi method via the internet to facilitate a qualitative understanding of participants’ personal jazz experiences across space, time, and styles. No one knows everything about jazz dance, because it is evolving every day and evolving differently in different cities. If we allow our various inquiries and voices to be muted, then we have all lost.