

Exploring the Movement and Cultural Literacy of Jazz

By: Tina Curran, Susan Gingrasso, [Teresa Heiland](#), Beth Megill, Paige Porter

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Abstract:

Are there identifiable elements of body action, use of space, movement quality, and relationship that are characteristic of the genre of jazz dance? If so, where are these elements found within the diverse styles of jazz? How do these core elements reveal relationships between the social, commercial and theatrical contexts of jazz dance? Can the identification and classification of these elements promote the effort to “legitimize” jazz dance as a meaningful and rigorous component of dance education and training in the academy? How does being literate in a dance genre reveal deeper physical, social, critical and artistic dimensions and connections?

These questions shaped our inquiry or emerged from our investigation as artist/teacher/researchers in the process of collaborative research to uncover what makes jazz dance count as a cultural, theatrical and commercial dance form. Using the frameworks of Laban Movement Analysis and Language of Dance®, we identified core characteristics of jazz across jazz styles in a multi-layered analysis of performative and written literature. Through this content analysis, experiential investigation and shared knowledge, central characteristics emerged that we refer to as “Africanist Aesthetics”.

Our goal in this workshop was to experientially, analytically, playfully and collaboratively explore selected Africanist Aesthetics elements in the context of three jazz dance styles and to examine the merit of these elements in an interactive dialogue with our jazz dance and dance education colleagues. The aim of this investigation was to build upon prior and ongoing conversations about jazz dance practice and pedagogy. It was our desire to interrogate and expand the scope of our creative research and practice to advocate for jazz dance as a valued facet of dance education. A playful movement experience, lively critical reflection, active dialogue and thoughtful sharing comprised the experience.

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Editor

Movement

Exploring the Movement and Cultural Literacy of Jazz

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SUMMARY

Are there identifiable elements of body action, use of space, movement quality, and relationship that are characteristic of the genre of jazz dance? If so, where are these elements found within the diverse styles of jazz? How do these core elements reveal relationships between the social, commercial and theatrical contexts of jazz dance? Can the identification and classification of these elements promote the effort to “legitimize” jazz dance as a meaningful and rigorous component of dance education and training in the academy? How does being literate in a dance genre reveal deeper physical, social, critical and artistic dimensions and connections?

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THE WORKSHOP

Lead by Tina Curran, Teresa Heiland, Susan Gingrasso, Beth Megill and Paige Porter, this workshop immediately followed the presentation of our panel *The Art and Craft of Teaching with Literacy at its Core: Jazz Dance* (the write up is included in this proceedings). The aim of our workshop session was to bring others together in exploration and for discussion to shape a shared movement dialogue of jazz dance experience and knowledge. We did not present ourselves as an authority but rather to share our particular inquiry and interpretations of Africanist Aesthetics through Laban Movement Analysis (LMA) and Language of Dance[®] (LOD) (Guest and Curran 2008) including the use of Motif Notation to symbolically represent concepts. We know there are many definitions of jazz and lines to determine what is jazz or *when* is jazz. But our goal was not to draw lines, rather, it was to consider the viewpoint of our students, to imagine looking through their eyes to find a starting point. We shifted our focus towards accessing kinetic information integral to jazz for ways to gain insight about how our students might explore this genre of movement.

Our desire was to add to the ongoing dialogue of jazz dance with other dancers and dance educators. Our investigation was shaped by these inquiries:

- Is looking at the genre of jazz through the lenses of LMA and LOD useful to us as dancers? As dance educators? To our students?
- What are ways we embody jazz in its improvisatory form? In social interaction forms? In concert and commercial dance forms?

We intentionally did not begin with an introduction or exploration of vernacular jazz in this workshop. Instead we began with an exploration of selected Africanist Aesthetics through movement. Our purpose focused on discovering what the participants would share from their own embodied experiences, classifications and understandings of selected styles of jazz. We choose a divergent approach for this investigation to cast a wide net and to discover what might emerge as themes and questions.

Some sixty dancers and dance educators in attendance kinetically explored selected Africanist Aesthetics characteristics that began with a warm up led by Beth Megill. Our earlier investigations had shown us the importance of using a circular spatial arrangement for the warm up and having the music drive the dancing in a playful, call and response community movement interaction with preselected African Aesthetics shown in Figure 1: Circle Warm Up Using Africanist Aesthetics for Jazz Dance Literacy. As Megill called out concepts to move, she actively engaged with a many participants in the circle, building of our dancing community and modeling the interactivity needed for the next phase of the workshop. This jazz lab warm up model that uses Africanist Aesthetics for jazz dance literacy fosters:

- Increasing participation in the experience of movement
- Building community among participants
- Engaging in lively improvisation
- Developing alert interaction through call and response, and
- Creating a safe environment for interactivity

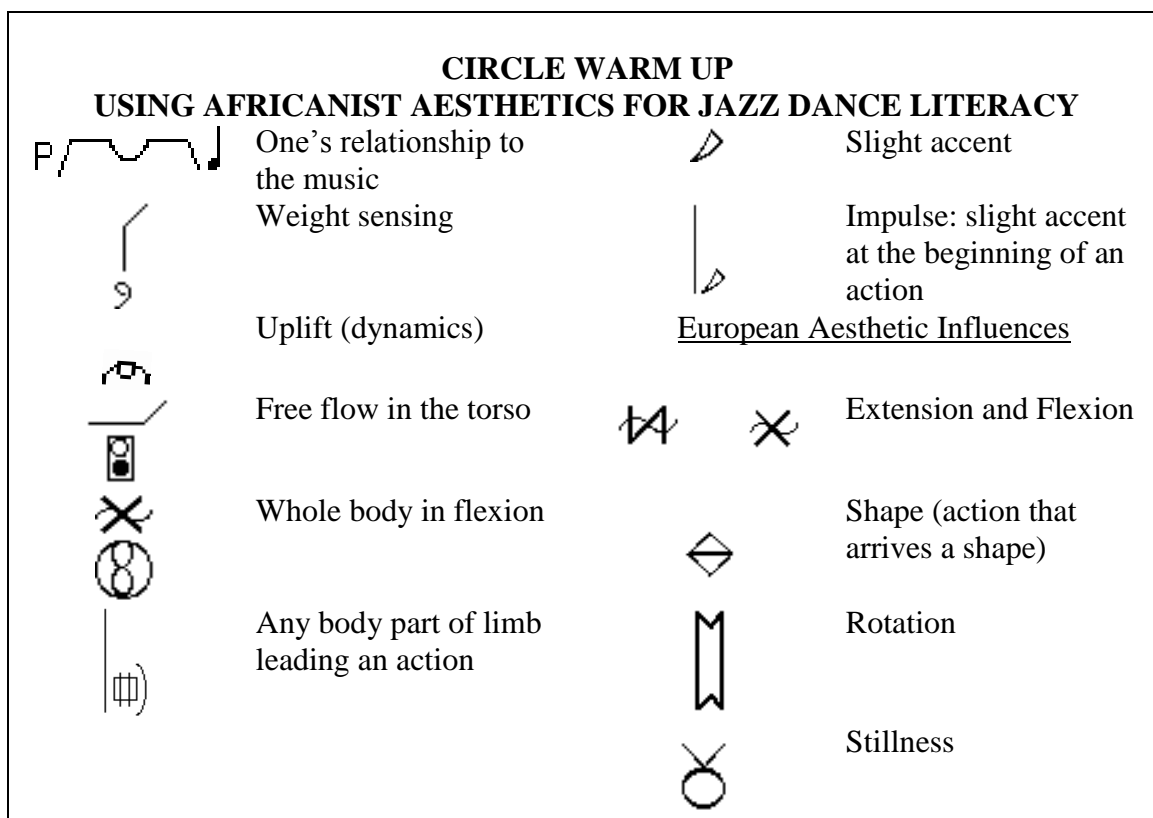


Figure 1: Circle Warm Up Using Africanist Aesthetics for Jazz Dance Literacy

To focus the scope of inquiry, we chose to explore Africanist Aesthetics in the context of three jazz styles: Classical Jazz, Funk / Hip Hop, and Contemporary Jazz. We hoped that through the interactive play of directed group improvisation in each group, we would be able to create a music driven environment to evoke spontaneous movement responses that accessed individual embodied knowledge of the steps, attitudes and values of each of the three styles. We entertained the idea that the shared collective experience of those in each group would induce a think tank approach to diving, through movement, into the style, and that as individuals shared their felt and remembered sensations and movements that a constellation of ideas inherent to the style would emerge that we could capture with pen on paper. Analysis of the concepts documented about each style provided yet another inroad into our examining the presence or absence of Africanist Aesthetics or an integration of Africanist with Europeanist influences. This process with each breakout group contributed to lively discussion, movement ideas and some significant meaning making moments in the session. The facilitators for each group approached this generative and interactive process just a bit differently. Each of the three processes can be examined as the participant responses and interactions varied enough to suggest questions for further investigation. Participants self selected to be in a breakout group, with each group having about one-third of those in attendance. The three figures of the transcribed information from each group has been included complete with the LOD or LMA symbolic representations each facilitator included in the process of documenting participant contributions. Analysis of this rich data, especially as it relates and informs our initial thinking will require additional time.

Megill singlehandedly facilitated the Contemporary Jazz breakout group. She verbally guided those in her group to find themselves in a Contemporary Jazz place, having them sense the energetic place each needed to inhabit to start. She asked them to verbalize the movements, dynamics and sensations that emerged as they started to move from this Contemporary Jazz place. Megill told us in a debriefing we had about the workshop and panel prior to leaving the conference that those in her group provided observations quickly and in the process, she started to see their vocabulary grow and expand. She then asked each person to contemplate a particularly meaningful piece of contemporary jazz choreography to perform. One person volunteered and from her performance the group identified even more concepts. Megill told us that she had not realized until she had completed this process that she had not used music to guide the exploration as she had planned.

See Figure 2: Concepts generated by the Contemporary Jazz Breakout Group for the range of concepts this group generated.

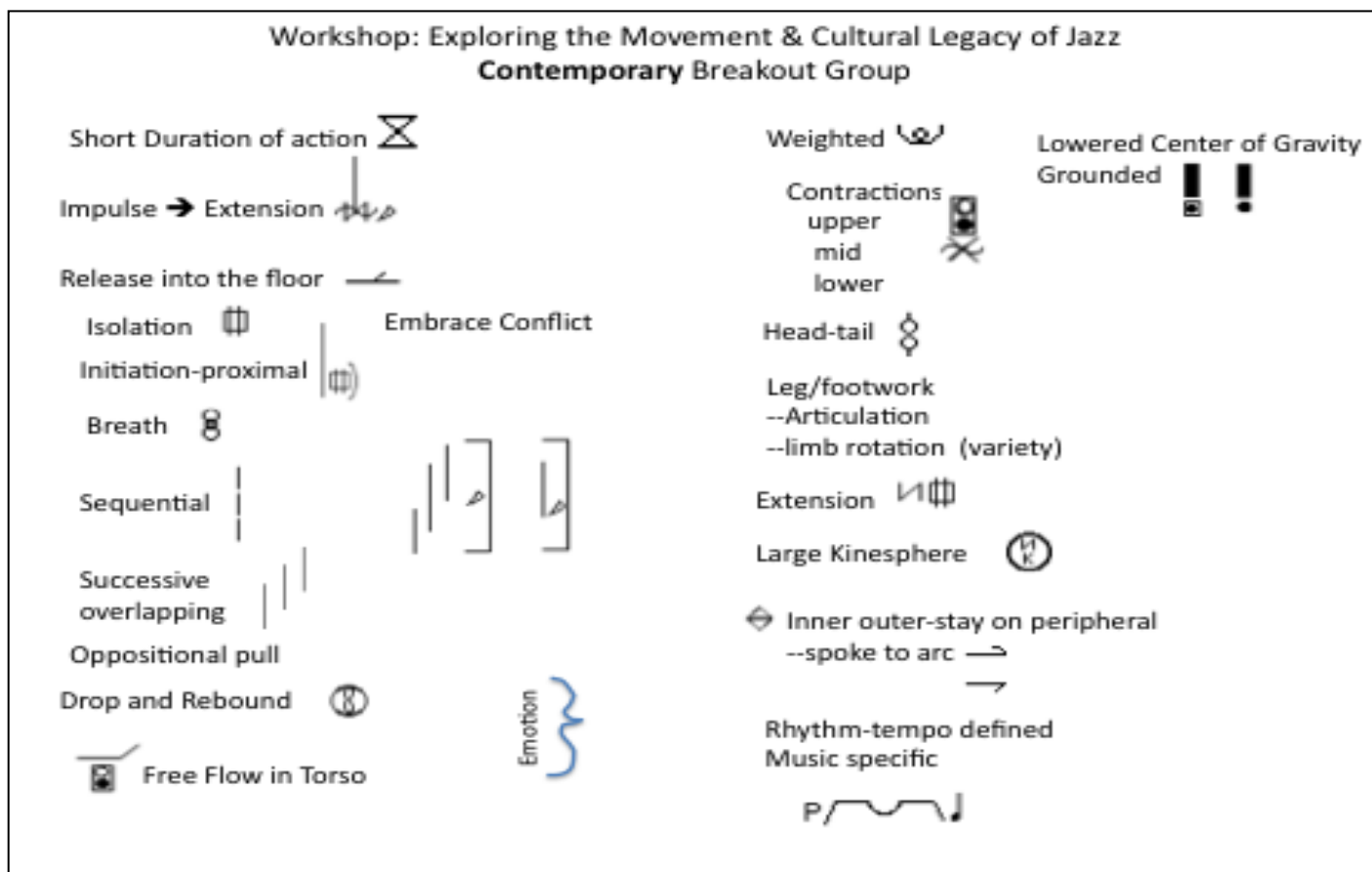


Figure 2: Concepts generated by the Contemporary Jazz Breakout Group

Porter and Curran facilitated the Funk/Hip Hop breakout group. In our debriefing session, Porter explained that she started immediately with a contemporary hip-hop music selection. Participants told her immediately that selection did not “move” them. Porter informed us that there is a considerable difference between hip hop music (not used for dancing), which is slower and more spacious, while hip-hop dance music is more like party music and has a more dense sound scape. She changed to music from the hip hop dance music style to more of a jazz funk music. She asked her participants to get into groups of three to devise a funk or hip-hop sequence that they would teach to their students or perform as a dancer. She discovered then that many needed a more embodied approach to these distinct styles to dive into the aesthetics. She recommended that if we do another think tank approach like this that we seek to engage those who come from an embodied approach and who can access hip-hop or funk bodily while finding the groove in the music. She recommended that we also separate the exploration of funk from that of hip hop. Curran collected ideas offered by group members that ultimately turned into a qualitative meta analysis of hip hop aesthetics which the group identified in reflection of their contributions. Note in Figure 3: Concepts generated by the Funk/Hip Hop Breakout Group, the concepts generated by the group are on the right side while the meta analysis groupings are on the left side.

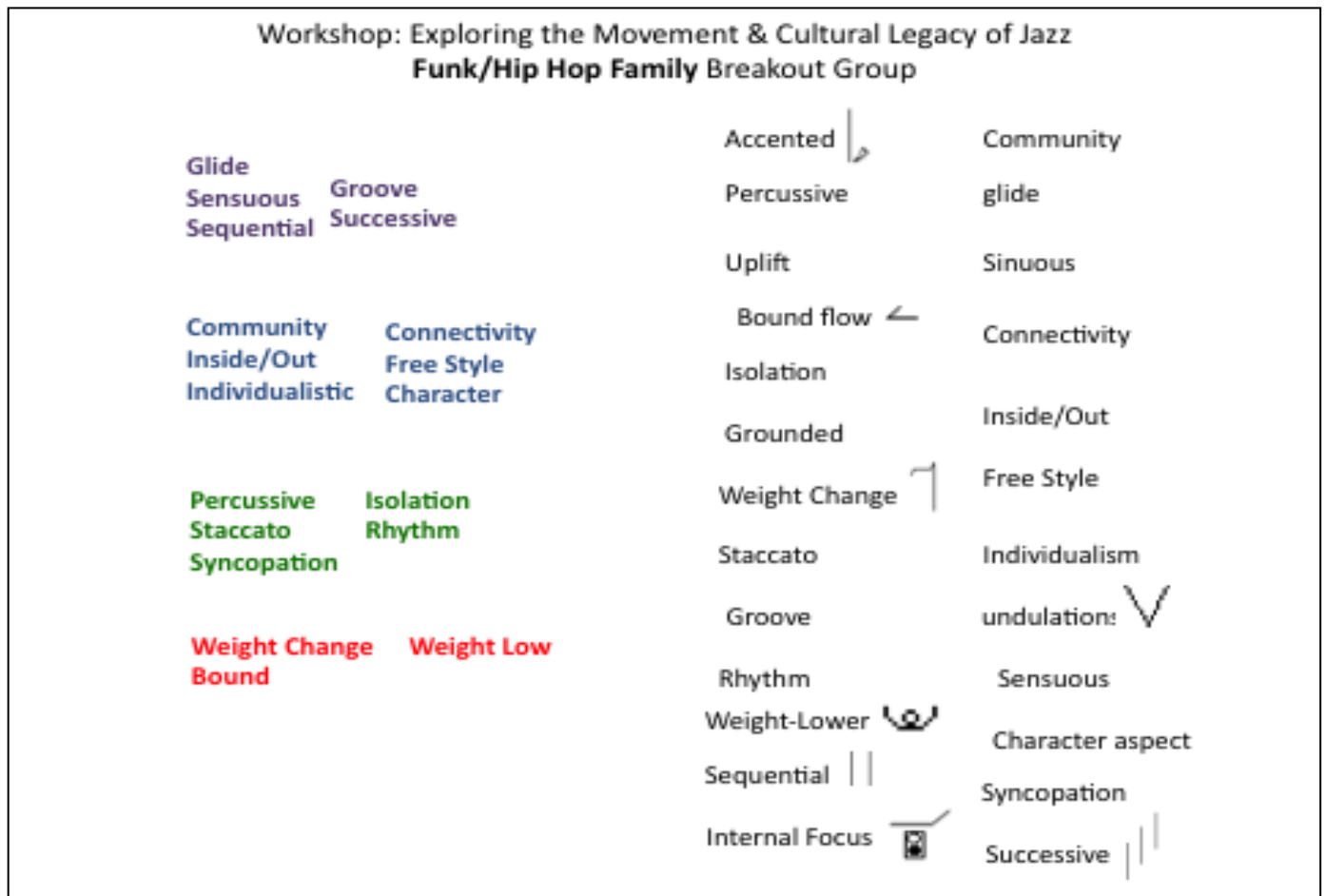


Figure 3: Concepts generated by the Funk/Hip Hop Breakout Group

Heiland and Gingrasso facilitated the Classical Jazz breakout group. Heiland defined the era of classical jazz as that period from 1950 to 1963 at the request of the participants. She asked the group to identify the classical jazz era choreographers to model this task and to they identified several to get the movement ideas to flow. Many participants in this group grew up in the classical jazz studios of this period and eagerly recalled the kinds of steps, qualities, values, choreographic forms and even pedagogical approaches they experienced in classical dance classes and forms. When Heiland realized they spoke these characteristics but had not yet moved them, she asked them to show her and identify more ideas as they moved to the classical jazz era music she played. Heiland realized that when someone demonstrated and spoke a movement idea, others in the group could not see her so she mirrored the movement she saw presented and encouraged the whole group to imitate that movement, an act in itself, which is very powerful and confirming. Then other participants would say “oh, you missed this or that.” Heiland noted in our debriefing that when she got the five-minute time warning she asked the group if we could circle the aesthetics that were more of European origin on our chart. As we circled various concepts that appeared to be more European in their aesthetic values, session participant Sandi Stratton Gonzales noted that by the time of classical jazz the Africanist and Europeanist aesthetics had become enmeshed. In the remaining time, Heiland asked that the group divide into three smaller groups to prepare something of import to Classical Jazz to embody and present to the whole session when we reconvened.

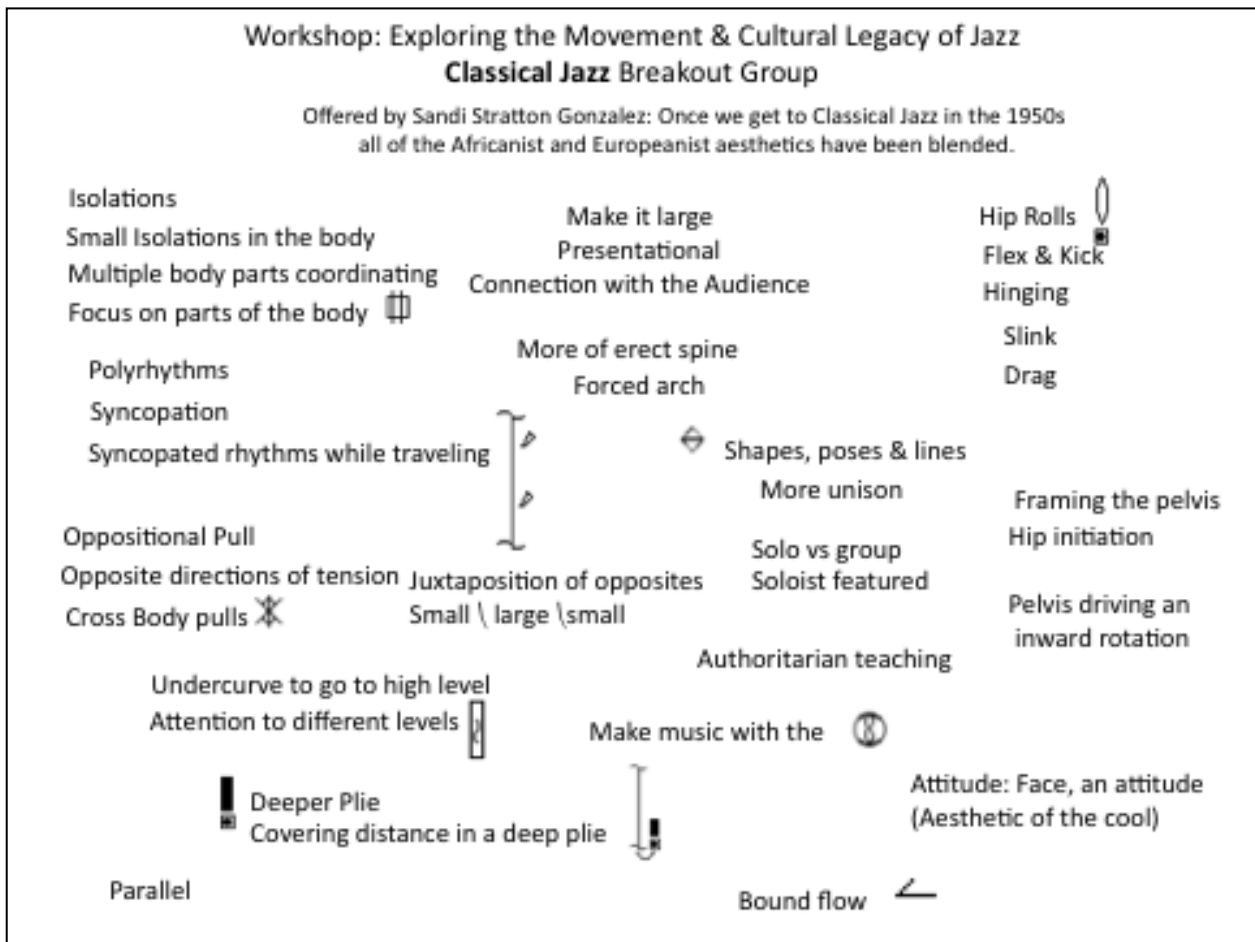


Figure 4: Concepts generated by the Classical Jazz Breakout Group

Our participants dived into our 20-minute breakout group sessions to generate a wealth of verbal and movement information about these three diverse styles of jazz, historic to contemporary. We realized that through this model, we disseminated a very condensed version of our own process and the thinking we used to sift and sort out the essential Africanist Aesthetics characteristic of these three and several other jazz dance styles. This process is explained more fully in *The Art and Craft of Teaching with Literacy at its Core: Jazz Dance* within these proceedings.

During our reflection following the workshop, we realized that we want to continue to explore how the lenses of LOD and LMA might be useful to jazz dancers, jazz dance students and educators in the teaching and learning process that heightens and enlivens jazz in its improvisatory forms, in its social forms and in its commercial and concert forms. We also noted that in future think-tank sessions of this highly interactive nature, we will want to reinforce our purpose to collect embodied information and to make sure that participants understand we present a model for exploration rather than definition.

We are deeply indebted to our sixty plus participants for joining us on this journey to identify and locate the Africanist Aesthetics, the place from which we all agreed the teaching of jazz needs to be grounded, in historical and contemporary forms.

BIOGRAPHIES

Tina Curran, Ph.D., MFA, LOD Certification Specialist, teaches as an Assistant Professor at The University of Texas at Austin where she is co-developing the dance education program as part of the BFA in Dance. She also serves on the faculty of the Dance Education Laboratory at the 92nd Street Y Harkness

Dance Center in New York. Her research focuses on the development of dance literacy and dance legacy in dance and teacher education. A co-founder of the Language of Dance Center (USA), Tina has conducted certification courses in the United States, Mexico, United Kingdom, and Taipei. Her book credits include: *Your Move: The Language of Dance Approach to Movement and Dance* (2nd Ed.) co-authored with Dr. Ann Hutchinson Guest. Tina is a member of the International Council of Kinetography Laban and serves on the Professional Advisory Committee of the Dance Notation Bureau.

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Susan Gingrasso, MA, CMA, LOD Certification Specialist and Professor Emeritus, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, brought the dance program to state and national prominence for which she received NDEOs Outstanding Dance Educator Award in Higher Education in 2006. Her research focuses on the assessment-based teaching she created using Language of Dance® and Laban Movement Analysis, and the dance assessment strategies she developed at the Dance Education Laboratory (DEL) in NYC. The Associate Director for the Language of Dance® Center, USA, Susan teaches LOD certification courses for DEL and the LODC. Susan serves on the NDEO Board as the Director of Resources Review as the Treasurer of the International Council of Kinetography Laban.

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Teresa Heiland, PhD, CMA, Assistant Professor, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, teaches pedagogy, dance wellness, conditioning, choreography, Senior Thesis, and First Year Seminar, *Empathy: The Antidote to Bullying Self, Others, and the Planet*. She completed her MA and PhD in dance education at NYU. In 1995 with Ann Hutchinson Guest, she restaged Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*. After studying Javanese dance for a year in Indonesia, she completed her Language of Dance, Laban Movement Analysis, and Franklin Method (Level 3) certifications. She researches how imagery affects dance technique, how LA affects dance and dancers' lives, how dancers learn through writing, and how notation supports dancers' learning and dancing. Teresa was named a Carnegie Scholar by the Carnegie Academy of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in 2011. She serves on the Media Committee of the International Association of Dance Medicine and Science and on the Board of the Language of Dance.

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Beth Megill, MFA is beginning her seventh year teaching at Moorpark College in Southern California, where she enjoys a full time teaching load in a variety of dance styles, and has the freedom to continually develop and refine her teaching methodology and pedagogy. Beth's primary interests lie in the role of dance literacy in Higher Education and the presence of dance notation and theory to support dance as an area of research in addition to performance at colleges and universities. She has most recently teamed with Dave Massey from MiraCosta College in the publication of an online dance appreciation course and is finishing her Stage 3 Language of Dance certification for her work on utilizing LOD in the teaching of dance appreciation online as a general education requirement.

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Paige Porter, MFA candidate. Educator and choreographer, Paige specializes in the study of jazz dance and its relevance to current popular and dance culture. Paige has served on the Loyola Marymount University Dance Program faculty since 2002, initiating alternative methods of study and developing a comprehensive jazz curriculum. Her teaching emphasizes personal autonomy while highlighting the commonality of the dancer's experience. Paige is co-creator/director of the distinctive LMU workshop, "plunge," which hosts contemporary artists such as Sonya Tayeh, Justin Giles, and Ryan Heffington. Her extensive insight and experience has led her to create multiple programs and pre-professional companies to enhance the training

and abilities of students in secondary education and private sector environments. She also works in the disciplines of competitive figure skating and gymnastics. Paige is a former student of the Oklahoma City University dance program and received her Bachelors of Arts Degree in Dance from Loyola Marymount University.

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