Megan Wurtz

Dr. Hannah Kosstrin

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The African(ist) Roots of American Tap Dance and their Invisibilization

The African and Africanist influences on nearly all things American have long been overlooked, ignored, or forgotten. The ideas, traditions, movement, religion, and other cultural aspects from African roots that have blended with, and developed into, American culture have suffered disregard towards their influences. This idea, deemed “invisibilization” by Brenda Dixon Gottschild, covers the past and present of the overlooking that has occurred towards Africanist influences on European culture. The intertextuality that naturally takes place between groups around the globe serves to explain the many cultural influences that add up and blur together to form a unique American culture. In regards to dance, Africanist aesthetics have provided great inspiration for the development of many European styles in America, but again their impact has often been disregarded. Specifically, in American tap dance, movements have come directly from traditional west African dance forms and Africanist aesthetics that developed the style into what it is. Typically, though, the work and art of African and African American dancers/dance styles that contributed to this has not been credited. My personal tap dance training serves as an example of invisibilization, as I was never provided with the knowledge of the African(ist) roots of the style that I have trained in since I began dancing. This paper serves as a corrective for me, and any other American dancers or tap dancers, to the legacy of invisibilization that has been passed down through the form.

When I was five years old I was signed up by my mother for a “kiddy combo” class. I was given my small white tap shoes and learned how to shuffle-ball-change. It was suggested to me to watch *Singin’ in the Rain* and Shirley Temple. I ignorantly yet happily flapped my way through the next fifteen years in my tap shoes. It wasn’t until my second year of college, conveniently while I was in the rehearsal process of a tap piece, that I was even made aware of the Africanist roots of tap dancing. This in itself *is* invisibilization. I, as a white American, was unknowingly taught an African rooted dance style by my white American dance teacher, by no fault of her own. Never was she made aware of the Africanist influences that were the basis of her teaching career by her white American dance teacher either. Gottschild describes where this lineage experience of ignorance comes from, creating the term invisibilization. “At the same time, it has suffered from sins of commission and omission; it has been “invisibilized” to coin a new word. Racial segregation and discrimination are the culprits in the systematic denial and exploitation of this powerful influence” (Gottschild 2). I was now given a lens to view tap dance in a new way and look for its African roots in its history and movement.

*Singin’ in the Rain* (1952) had always been what came to mind when thinking of tap dancing. I had grown up watching pieces set to songs such as “Moses” and “Good Morning” from the movie’s soundtrack. For me, Gene Kelly became the iconic tap dancer. The narrator of a film on the dancer stated “Gene Kelly was one of the most charismatic figures in the history of the film musical, and a major influence in creating a new form of American dance” (Saville). A dance historian acting as a speaker in the film went on to say “Singing, dancing, acting, but not only that, but creating the steps that we remember so well” (Saville). Indeed, he was a charismatic performer and creator, but this raises the questions of to what extent dance can be made new, and what is necessarily American. Giving Kelly credit for creating a new form of dance, with his primary style being tap, is once again overlooking where he may have drawn his inspiration. In Constance Valis Hill’s book *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*, the dichotomy between the accepted histories of tap dance, primarily the white, Hollywood famed history involving Kelly, Fred Astaire, and the likes are corrected with the histories of black cultural dance forms (Hilton 115). I will give examples in the following paragraphs of the Africanist dance aesthetics that can be seen permeating Kelly’s performances and works, as well as white American tap in a broader sense, as it is important to acknowledge these influences if he is to be credited with creating an American dance style. In the beginning of her book, Gottschild describes how these influences have an important impact on defining what is American aesthetically. What is defined as American often needs to be broken down into its multicultural roots, as they are important aspects of a nation comprised of peoples from all over the globe and their cultures.

Pulling from the works of other dance writers, Gottschild lays out in her book a list of five Africanist aesthetics that are vital to the style. They differ greatly from the basic ideals of European dance styles, but this allows their influences in European dance forms to be more easily recognizable. The main differences between Africanist and European dance are that Africanist dance styles value the process of experience and a flexible and lively body, whereas European dance styles value a final product with a centered and controlled body. Valuing the process of experience is to value living in the moment, growing through the work in its practice, and not looking for a specific outcome. This ties into the value of a flexible and lively body, as feeling, and showing vitality is very in the moment, and cannot have an end without it being death. The opposite is focused on what will be shown to other people and not as much on a personal lively experience. The five Africanist aesthetics described are embracing the conflict, polycentrism/polyrhythm, high-affect juxtaposition, ephebism, and the aesthetic of “the cool.” Each aesthetic exists within the others; the same way the others exist within it.

The aesthetic of embracing the conflict ties closely with the ideals of process and experience. Gottschild describes the conflict to be implied by the differences and irregularity that is involved, not that it should be erased or fixed (Gottschild 13). There need be no resolution. Rather, conflict is embraced and worked through or with. This is a point in a list of eleven aspects of African dance laid out by Mark Knowles in his book*.* “For the African, dance was an expression of immediate experience. This experience was then interpreted in a stylized, ordered fashion. Within this framework, invention and innovation were encouraged, and individuality and originality greatly admired” (Knowles 23). Kelly’s dancing seemed to be more of this idea of an expression of his personal experiences as an individual, rather than an enhanced and glamorized performance. Compared to Fred Astaire, Kelly claimed to be a different performer, in that where Astaire wore a high end suit, Kelly danced in tee-shirts as a more common man. Kelly was taking his personal life and stylizing his experience within a dance framework, embracing the conflict.

The aesthetic of polycentrism and polyrhythm are quite easy to see, and hear, in Africanist dance forms. Polycentrism differs greatly from the upright spine of European ballet. It is defined as the use of many centers, or movement emanating from or beginning from many points in the body. This use of multiple body centers allowed for multiple rhythms to come from the body at once. For example, the feet, arms, head, or torso may produce different rhythms at the same time to create one unique overall rhythm emanating from the whole body. Tap dancing itself, with its loose ankles, allows for polyrhythms to take place in the feet, making audible the many rhythms that the whole body sometimes makes. In Gene Kelly’s performances we see this, along with the use of a looser torso and arms acting as multiple movement centers, as he created “his own style” to capture the audience’s attention in a new way. In comparison, black dancer Bill “Bojangles” Robinson was performing for primarily white dominated audiences, and adopted an upright torso posture. This could be seen as a sort of exchange or uptake of ideas based on context and ease of ability.

A striking similarity between these two, though, that I saw while viewing their works was the use of stairs. Aside from the African(ist) aesthetic roots that can be seen interracially in American tap dance, choreographic influences can also be found in many different performance venues. I first viewed Bill Robinson’s performance up and down a set of stairs in *Harlem is Heaven* from 1918 on the Vaudeville circuit. While later watching clips from Gene Kelly’s *Cover Girl* (1944), I could not ignore the exact use of a set of stairs for very similar movements and sounds in the choreography of “Make Way for Tomorrow.” Stair dances appear to be very popular in the tap dance style. A tap dance on stairs can be seen choreographed into the “Jumping Jive” scene of *Stormy Weather* (1943). Here, the famous tap duo the Nicholas Brothers put on a playful performance that takes them flying over the music stands of the performing band, tapping on a piano, and jumping up and down two sets of stairs. Reviews of the performance are quoted in Hill’s book *Brotherhood in Rhythm,* including one by Donald Bogle. “This highly demanding performance is so perfectly executed – splendidly styled yet seemingly spontaneous, too, without any sign of strain or sweat – that it truly commands our respect and inspires awe” (qtd. in Hill, *Brotherhood in Rhythm* 184). The performances previously mentioned by Robinson and Kelly make the same use of crisply executed choreography on sets of stairs. Invisibilization is the only excuse, if I may make one, for myself having only seen the performances by Kelly and not the other aforementioned famous tap performers. The choreographic similarities and availability of video could have lent themselves to me seeing each of these equally during my training. Instead, only now do I see the roots of these works. Video recordings of all three works show the use of the sounds made by ascending the steps as a part of the rhythms, and show how the pieces make use of the verticality of the stairs to travel tap dance on levels that it would not otherwise reach in the performance space.

Juxtaposition is an aesthetic used to make one thing stand out in comparison to something else and push forward their contrasts. “All traditions use contrast in the arts, but Africanist high-affect juxtaposition is heightened beyond the contrast that is within the range of accepted standards in the Europeanist academic canon” (Gottschild 14). The aesthetic of high-affect juxtaposition brings forth many of the other aesthetics. Contrast could not be seen nor embraced if things were not compared against one another, and we will see later how the aesthetic of “the cool” can only exist through juxtaposition of attitude and body. Juxtaposing opposites allows for the performer to surpass expectations, keep an audience curious about what could happen next, and create a lively performance with a roller coaster of irony, surprise, comedy, and originality. “Mood, attitude, or movement breaks that omit the transitions and connective links valued in the European academic aesthetic are the key-note of this principle” (Gottschild 14). One way this aesthetic pins Africanist rhythm against European is the difference of accents musically. “European music usually accented the first and third beats in a bar of music, whereas the swaying motion in African dance tended to cause the accent to fall on the second and fourth beats. This rebounding or bouncy feeling of stressing the offbeat is what lead to jazz and swing, and influenced the development of syncopation in American tap” (Knowles 24). By comparing the contrasts between musicality used in traditionally European or African settings, we notice the important aspects of each style more, and can therefor isolate and trace their influences better.

The aesthetic of ephebism in the Africanist dance style comes from important values of African people. Dance was used to express emotion, to experience something, to worship religion, to be a part of a community, and to express individuality. The important thing in each was living and vitality; ephebism. The body was to be relaxed, flexible, able rebound as it moved, otherwise you could have been looked at as a corpse. This allowed for the aesthetic of the fully mobile and responsive body that is seen in tap. Gottschild connects the importance of ephebism with the percussiveness of African dance styles, that contributed to the development of tap dance. The vital liveliness of an articulate body lends itself to the interpretation as percussive instruments from independent parts of the body. Gene Kelly can be seen in his performances allowing his arms to swing and follow where his looser torso takes them. He was contrasted with his predecessor Fred Astaire, concluding that Kelly was not nearly as graceful or elegant by Europeanistic standards as Astaire was. Kelly was looser, bouncier, and moved lower; all aspects of the aesthetic of ephebism.

The aesthetic of “the cool” is something that goes beyond dance and into more every-day life with a further reach than the other aesthetics. It is an attitude of movement, emotion, and expression that combines the vitality of ephebism with its juxtaposition against a relaxed and cool composure. The seemingly casualness that floats on top of a hot moving body in the Africanist aesthetic is starkly different than the composed attitude on a trained body in European styles. “The European attitude suggests centeredness, control, linearity, directness; the Africanist mode suggests asymmetricality (that plays with falling off center), looseness (implying flexibility and vitality), and indirectness of approach” (Gottschild 17). The adoption of this by white performers was seen on the Vaudeville stage in the performances of Will Mahoney. The defining characteristics of his 1934 performance of “She’s my Lily” include indirectness, falling off of center (even all the way to the ground), and opposing facial expression to movement.

The aesthetics described above are defining characteristics of African rooted dances, which differ greatly from the European based dancing that dominates the performance stage or screen in America. These great differences allow us to observe where cultures have come together and influenced one another. It tends to occur in such a way that the dominant culture at the time of the exchange receives the upper hand in telling the story of what was taken from whom, if at all. Gottschild describes this direct removal of credit as a large part of the invisibilization and its effects thereafter. “Attempts to eradicate memory act as a roadblock to empowerment, perpetuate a language of silence, enforce a politic of denial, and reinforce past suffering into the present” (Gottschild 6). The memory is easily altered. Names such as Gene Kelly, Donald O’Connor, and Jackie Gleason dominate the remembered success of tap dance. Whereas their contemporaries Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Leon Collins, Jimmy Slyde, and Sammy Davis, Jr. are drawing from and providing similar influence for tap while not being given such credit. This is again after forgetting the success of other black performers such as the Nicholas Brothers, “Rubberneck” Holmes, and many others, as well as the influences of Harlem hotspots for the development of tap such as the Cotton Club and Apollo Theater. The Africanist and cultural roots of tap, the African American contributions to the development of tap, and the success of many performers were overshadowed and invisibilized by the dominant white culture of America. This has continued throughout the history of the dance style to the point where, now, a young white dance student may never know the true history of the style they are studying. Until conducting my research, I was a part of this ignorant white culture in America, with my personal history of unknowingly invisiblizing the Africanist roots of the tap dancing I have learned since I was five years old. I now am a step closer to realizing the dance lineage I am a part of, and have been given the tools to dive deeper into new realizations for myself and others.

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