

Introduction

LINDSAY GUARINO, CARLOS R. A. JONES,
AND WENDY OLIVER

The United States is in a period of recognizing past and present instances of systemic racism. As we write this introduction, protests and riots rage across the country in anguish over the killing of Black citizen George Floyd by a White Minneapolis police officer. Floyd's death is only one in an ongoing litany of Black men and women killed in the name of law enforcement ever since the onset of slavery in 1619. Meanwhile, Covid-19 is tearing through our population, with far more devastating consequences for people of color than for White folks. The unequal treatment of people of color, and African Americans in particular, is a legacy of slavery and the open wounds that remained after Emancipation in the late nineteenth century.

Scholar bell hooks reminds us that “again and again visionary thinkers on the subject of race encourage us to confront directly and honestly the way in which White supremacist ideology informs the lives of everyone in our nation to a greater or lesser degree . . . White supremacist thinking informs the consciousness of everyone irrespective of skin color.”¹ hooks goes on to say that if we can accept this truth, then we can move beyond binaries: “Unless we make a conscious effort to change thought and action by honestly naming all the myriad ways white supremacy impinges on daily life, then we cannot shift from a politics of hate and create a new foundation based on a revolution of love.”² White people in particular need to understand how American culture has developed so that “Whiteness” is invisible, and how that invisibility allows Whiteness to be the dominant sociopolitical and psychic force shaping our society.

Once we understand the pervasive nature of Whiteness, it is vital to acknowledge racism in ourselves and fight against it in every way possible. Activist and author Ibram X. Kendi explains that most people in our society



FIGURE 0.2.
Juneteenth celebra-
tion and protest,
June 19, 2020,
Providence, Rhode
Island. Photo by
Wendy Oliver.

today consider themselves “not racist”: “What’s the problem with being ‘not racist’? It is a claim that signifies neutrality . . . But there is no neutrality in the racism struggle . . . [T]he opposite of ‘racist’ isn’t ‘not racist.’ It’s antiracist.”³ Kendi tells us that the key is finding where the power lies to make positive change, and to create policies that can change lives. Kendi’s Boston University Center for Antiracist Research does that by bringing together researchers and practitioners across disciplines to better understand and fight racial inequity and injustice.⁴ Research, education, advocacy and policy innovation all work hand-in-hand to bring about change.

As Black and White dance educators and artists, the editors of this book feel a responsibility to future and current generations of students, teachers, and artists to address the racism and some of the past injustices within our own field. We may not personally be able to prevent racism across our country, but we can look at instances in our own field where harm has been inflicted and work to correct them. We look at this as a form of reparations.

In June 2019, the 116th U.S. Congress passed the HR40 Bill, which established the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act.⁵ Additionally, reparations are a current topic of discussion at some institutions of higher learning, where the use of slave labor to build historic campuses is being acknowledged. Some of the institutions joining the discussion include the University of Virginia, Georgetown University, University of Wisconsin, Madison, and University of Mississippi.⁶ Likewise, the dance community needs to uncover, acknowledge, and begin to make reparations to the African American arts community, including the many artists who are the unsung innovators and pioneers of jazz dance. This book is a small step in that direction.

In these pages, we present the obscured story of how normalized Whiteness has permeated our dance culture to such an extent that dance educators, performers, and choreographers have been participating unawares in a misguided appropriation of artistic capital. In order to unpack this dilemma, we describe, analyze, affirm, and celebrate the Africanist aesthetic in jazz dance, which has often been overlooked within the jazz dance world since the mid-twentieth century. This common understanding will help us all be more informed creators, performers, scholars, and teachers; it will continue the narrative of investigating African American forms within dance. In 1993, scholar Sally Banes pointed out Balanchine's use of jazz dance characteristics, noting that, when choreographing *Agon*, "Balanchine specifically borrows from an African-rooted aesthetic, introducing into the classical ballet vocabulary the angular arms, curved torso, percussive footwork, syncopated rhythms, and claps, slaps, and fingersnaps of African American jazz dancing. The music, too, bears traces of jazz influences."⁷ Brenda Dixon Gottschild made a similar observation in her influential essay "Stripping the Emperor: The Africanist Presence in American Concert Dance": "The Africanist presence in Balanchine's works is a story of particular and specific motifs . . . from ballets that span the course of his career. In other words, these were not dispensable, decorative touches that marked one or two ballets; rather, they were essential ingredients in his canon."⁸ These revelations led the dance world to look more closely at the assumption that American ballet was/is a solely European-based form.

We are continuing in this tradition of revealing and celebrating the Africanist presence in American dance, albeit within the realm of jazz dance. Although some people know that jazz dance has roots in the African diaspora, there is no clear, common understanding of what that means and how it expresses itself physically and emotionally through movement. Many dancers today are unaware that jazz dance comes from Black American people and

culture because they have been taught by (mostly) White teachers who do not include historical context as part of their teaching. One way that we editors know of this lack is through our own teaching. Each of us has worked with experienced dance students who are surprised to find out that the history of jazz dance did not start with White artists such as Jack Cole or Bob Fosse. The lack of recognition of the African and African American roots of jazz dance is a product of racism and appropriation, which has influenced the trajectory of the art form.

In our first book, *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches* (2014),⁹ jazz dance was conceptualized and diagrammed as a tree, with African roots, European influences, and a trunk consisting of African American vernacular dance. There are many different branches extending from the tree, including hip-hop, musical theater, lyrical, and Latin jazz, to name a few. That book focused mainly upon the history of jazz dance and incorporated all branches of the tree, including discussions of the many genres of dance with African roots that are not specifically “jazz.” In contrast, this volume does not attempt to look at all forms of dance with African roots but instead examines jazz practices that are “rooted,” meaning they clearly acknowledge and incorporate an Africanist aesthetic. For a comprehensive study of early to mid-twentieth-century jazz dance, Marshall Stearns and Jean Stearns’s *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* is excellent,¹⁰ and there are several others on Black dance in the United States that provide important, detailed historical information and documentation on African diasporic forms.¹¹

The same jazz tree appears in this book but is discussed differently. As editors, we are considering the climate and external factors affecting the tree more than the various styles represented in the branches. Picture the jazz tree, planted in American soil on land stolen from Native Americans and laden with the remains of genocidal violence, its roots West African but anchored in America only because of the forced enslavement of Black people. From its origins, the jazz tree has weathered the impacts of a climate saturated with racism. While we cannot change the past, we can change the climate where the tree grows by eradicating White supremacy and providing nourishment for future blossoms to emerge.

In order to change the climate where the jazz tree grows, this book looks closely at jazz dance as an art form, and how it expresses an Africanist aesthetic in a way that is uniquely African American. This book does not offer a comprehensive history of jazz dance but, instead, a particular perspective that is timely for the twenty-first century, as our country collectively examines the history of race in the United States. To aid in this discussion, we have included

the poem “I Am Jazz” by Cory Bowles at the end of this introduction, which personifies jazz dance to tell the arc of its history while providing context for the spirit of jazz in the pages that follow.

Identifying Africanist aesthetics as the root, or primary source, for jazz dance offers an important foundation for how jazz can be understood and embodied today. The term “Africanist,” as described by scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild, “includes concepts, practices, attitudes, or forms that have roots/origins in Africa and the African diaspora.”¹² Africanist aesthetics planted the seeds for the movement characteristics unique to jazz: rhythm generated from the inside out, improvisation, personal style, and individuality within community. However, by the time jazz emerged in the 1920s, approximately forty years after Emancipation, it reflected a cultural identity that was distinctly African American. Through centuries of blending Africanist movement aesthetics from disparate African countries and tribes, displaced through enslavement and influenced by European and Latin American aesthetics, the emerging jazz language was complex by nature. This connection between the African roots and the African American vernacular trunk of the jazz tree is described as the “missing link” by author Patricia Cohen in our first book: “Acknowledging the entirety of the genre allows us to establish historical, cultural, social, and kinetic continuity,” or what Cohen calls a continuum.¹³

For this reason, aesthetics cannot be discussed apart from their cultural, sociopolitical, and historical contexts. The word “Equity” in the title of this book points to the ways we can value, amplify, and honor African American people and culture through jazz choreography, pedagogy, and curriculum. Furthermore, seeing jazz in relation to the Black American experience illuminates the reasons why jazz has been devalued on concert dance stages and in the academy. To truly see jazz, the entire continuum from its roots to today, is to see racism in America. Identifying the impacts of White supremacy and Western ideology provides an opportunity for revising current practices and examining biases, which elevates jazz as a deserving and valued American art form. Striving toward equity means working toward a future where the Black members of the jazz community feel their ancestors have been fully acknowledged, when authentic community is experienced in dialogue across races, and when jazz dance is fully accepted as an art form no less than its Euro-American counterparts.

Although the gravity of this responsibility is enormous, it also carries the potential for not only cultivating empathy and kinship but for unearthing a fertile and exciting ground for creating and teaching jazz. Tapping into the aesthetic foundation that birthed jazz has the potential to ignite the same