

Tap Dance Choreography:
An exploration of tradition and innovation

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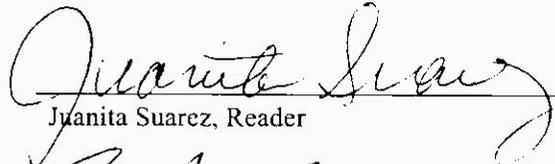
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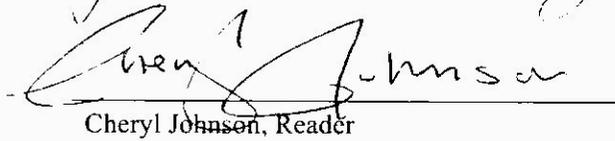
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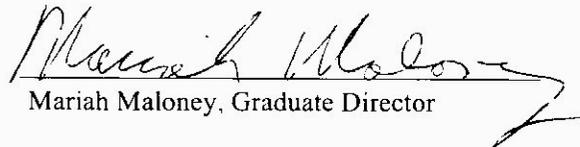
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ABSTRACT

Tap dance is a genuine American art form that has evolved from consolidated traditions to unexpected innovations in its technique and aesthetic. With awareness to social and cultural contexts, I aim to clarify the cyclical process between tradition and innovation in tap dance choreography. Through critical investigation of tap history, thorough study of the aesthetics developed by avant-garde female choreographers, and detailed description of my own creative process, I address choreographic possibilities in which tap dancing can evolve based on the relationship between tradition and innovation inherent to this dance form. With a research scope focused on women, this thesis also discusses about female role in tap throughout history and how choreographers like Chloe Arnold and Michelle Dorrance have achieved authority and recognition in the tap dance field. Ultimately, my purpose is to promote and cultivate tap dance making as an artistic process by fostering the dialogue between innovation and tradition in my personal choreographic investigation.

Keywords: Tap dance, Tradition, Innovation, Choreography, Creative process, Female choreographers.

PART I

(Choreo)Tap Like a Girl:

The relationship between tradition and innovation in tap dance choreography

INTRODUCTION

Tap dance is built on the relationship between tradition and innovation. Born as a street form, passed orally and visually, and developed through the culture of stealing steps and cutting contestsⁱ, tap has evolved from consolidated traditions to unexpected innovations in its technique and aesthetic. Throughout history, it is possible to identify many cutting-edge artists who have collaborated to the form tap dance is performed nowadays. The first tap dancer, William Henry Lane, mostly known as Master Juba, was responsible for “creating a new kind of dance that was neither African nor European: it was a new rhythmic blend.”¹ Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, the creator of time stepsⁱⁱ, was a pioneer by “dancing upright on the balls of his feet,”² and John Bubbles, the father of rhythm-tap, explored syncopation by “dropping the heels.”³ Gregory Hines, the ambassador of tap from 1970s until 1990s, is known by his incomparable improvisational skills and the development of “improvographyⁱⁱⁱ.” Hines’ improvisations captivated multiple audiences due to his groundbreaking proposal to introduce funk grooves to tap dance. Savion Glover and his exceptional technique innovated by including

¹ Hill, Constance. *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 12

² Ibid, 64

³ Ibid, 324

the hip-hop culture to the tap dancing aesthetic, which makes him responsible for engaging the current generation of tap dancers.

All tap dancers mentioned above share similarities in regard to their innovations, as they were black male performers and their inventive approaches to tap were in the realms of technique, rhythmic development and music style. Tap dance is rooted in cultural blend, and its development reflects the social contexts out of which it evolved. The segregated and misogynist environment of early American tap dance history resulted in a hierarchical polarization within gender and racial issues. The societal circumstances also influenced the relationship between tradition and innovation in the development of tap dance as a form.

Through critical investigation of tap history and detailed choreographic analyses, I offer a depolarized and horizontal perspective of cutting-edge aesthetics in tap dance. With awareness to social and cultural contexts, I aim to clarify the cyclical process between tradition and innovation in tap history, and identify specific avant-garde choreographic approaches featured by female choreographers in a dance genre historically dominated by men.

As part of a society in which gender equality is a necessity, it is important to reaffirm the relevance of women in tap dance. Therefore, I propose a reflection about their choreographic productions. The historical male supremacy reflects on a big part of tap dance literature, which rarely contemplates female choreographers as collaborators to the development of tap dance as an aesthetic

form. Thus, I seek to oppose this tendency and focus on innovative women in the realm of choreography more than in the technique or performance spheres.

In chapter one, I present tap dance origins within the relationship between tradition and innovation. Then, I focus on tap dance history from 1970s onward through an investigation of cutting-edge aesthetics developed by female choreographers. Additionally, I highlight the social and cultural challenges they have overcome and the effects of these changes on the roles of women in tap dancing nowadays. An understanding and definition of innovation in tap dance is shaped by a comprehensive look at the choreographic changes that occurred throughout tap dance history. Hence, it is critical to examine a historical perspective in order to support my analysis of the current innovations in tap choreography.

In chapter two and three, I examine ongoing female dance makers by promoting detailed choreographic analysis of their works. Owing to my interest in pushing my creative work to the edge of the tap dance form, I seek to highlight female artists that are considered role models for the new generation due to their singular approaches to tap dance. Today, the dance makers most acclaimed by critics are female choreographers, especially because of their exploration of tap with an avant-garde spirit. Thus, I focus my analysis on the aesthetics of two female artists who investigated innovative choreographic possibilities in tap dancing: Chloe Arnold and Michelle Dorrance.

Both choreographers are actively producing works with recognizable importance that point out two different approaches to tap dance: women's empowerment and intriguing artistic sensibility. Syncopated Ladies, Arnold's company, aim to empower women and to popularize tap dance for general audiences as an Internet success. Dorrance and her company, Dorrance Dance, performed in important dance venues - such as Jacob's Pillow, Joyce Theater, and Guggenheim Museum -, which has brought tap into the contemporary dance scene due to the use of technology, embodiment of sounds and sensitive choreographic crafting.

Hence, I propose an analysis of Arnold's and Dorrance's choreographies, with focus on their choreographic approaches, influences, and aesthetics. In order to identify the innovative aspects of their works, I base these analyses on performances, videos, interviews, articles, and dance reviews of their latest and most notorious choreographies. Through the detailed study of the aesthetics developed by Arnold and Dorrance, I aim to exemplify choreographic possibilities in which tap dancing can evolve based on the relationship between tradition and innovation in this dance form.

CHAPTER I

Tradition and Innovation

Dance scholar Marina Harss writes that the ephemeral nature of dance results in a “fraught relationship with the past. Some choreographers resist the tug of tradition; others eagerly look back.”⁴ Tap dancers have a strong and respectful connection with tradition. “Gregory Hines liked to say, about himself, that when he was dancing, you could see all the dancers who came before him.”⁵ Even though the relationship between tap and tradition can be understood as a resistance to innovation, there are several cutting-edge moments in tap dance history.

Tradition can be interpreted in different ways. Cambridge Dictionary, for example, defines tradition as a custom perpetuated for a long time in a group of people.⁶ However, scholar Eric Hobsbawm highlights that tradition and custom must not be considered as synonymous, even when both terms are intertwined – “the decline of *custom* inevitably changes the *tradition*.”⁷ According to Hobsbawm, custom is variant, flexible, and adherent to precedent, while tradition “is essentially a process of formalization and ritualization, characterized by

⁴ Harss, Marina. “Fleet of Foot” In *New Yorker*. March 14, 2016

⁵ Seibert, Bryan. *What The Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 15

⁶ Dictionary, Cambridge. Accessed May 25th 2017

<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english-portuguese/tradition>

⁷ Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Invention of Tradition*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 3

reference to the past, if only by imposing repetition.”⁸ Thus, the author emphasizes the dependent relationship between tradition and the past.

On the other hand, scholar Yaacov Yadgar interprets this connection through a broader scope. He argues that the concept *tradition* is part of a spectrum of meanings. It cannot be defined as invariant or be strictly associated with the past since it “transcends the false dichotomy between tradition/history and modern/change.”⁹ Therefore, *tradition* should not be understood as opposite to modern or as an assumed equivalent to old, former, or an unchangeable characteristic of a culture or a society.

Dance is an example of a cultural tradition that can change throughout time. The United States of America became a nation mostly due to the work of immigrants who, coming from different places, brought their unique traditional cultures and dances. Dance scholar Margaret Fuhrer explains the hybridization of diverse traditions throughout American history that created new movement techniques and aesthetics. The dance genres arisen from the streets “have proven to be the hardest styles of all. They were – are – the truest reflections of America, because they came directly from its people. Incredible diversity begets tension, and in street and popular dance we can see reflections of America’s political and

⁸ Hobsbawm. *The Invention of Tradition*, 4

⁹ Yadgar, Yaacov. *Tradition*. (*Human Studies*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2013), 454

class struggles.”¹⁰ Thus, the author emphasizes the influence of social issues in the development of genres like tap dance.

Tap is considered as a dance form that “America can claim as its own.”¹¹ Like Fuhrer explained previously, this is due not only because tap was born in the United States, but also because it “rose up from the bottom, from the country’s street corners and back alleys and jook joints, where immigrant cultures mixed and merged and mutated.”¹² The combination of various components from foreign dances and movement aesthetics was the base from which tap dance evolved as a performing art in America.

There are different theories about tap’s origins, but most scholars agree that its roots lie in English and Irish clog dancing and African tribal dances. Yet, tap dance scholar Constance Valis Hill points out that “although elements of English Clog, Scottish Highland, and early American folk dance blended elements of tap dance, Afro-Irish fusions in particular shaped and “rhythmetized” American tap dance and established and perpetuated such key features as the tap challenge.”¹³ Later, the author specifies what movement characteristics remained untouched by this fusion, preserving the West African and Irish origins:

the African American style of dance that angled and relaxed the torso, centered movement in the hips, and favored flat-footed gliding, dragging, and shuffling steps, melded with the Irish American style of step dancing, with upright torso, minimized hip

¹⁰ Fuhrer, Margaret. *American Dance: The Complete Illustrated History*, (Minneapolis: Voyageur Press, 2014), 11

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 2

motion, and dexterous footwork that favored bounding, hopping, and shuffling.¹⁴

Hence, the Afro-Irish root originated some of the basic and traditional characteristics of tap dancing, such as groundedness, improvisation, syncopation, free upper body, and footwork. As discussed previously, tap dance is an exemplification of Yadgar's theory, that traditions can mutate throughout time, especially when blended with other cultures. West African and Irish traditions have merged, changed, and resulted in a new dance aesthetic. Tap dance has evolved from established techniques, like Irish jig and Lancashire clog, that throughout time has changed and created styles that today are considered traditional, such as Broadway and rhythm tap. The cyclical relation between tradition and innovation is extremely important when analyzing choreographic patterns developed in tap history.

The dialogue between tradition and innovation in tap dance is primarily for tap community. Savion Glover states he is "just trying to hold down the art form. Keep it present, carry on the tradition."¹⁵ Glover highlights the connection between past and present, nostalgia and innovation in tap dance. His statement demonstrates the relevance of tradition to the form, which goes beyond the steps. The legacies of many incredible teachers, hoofers, and tap dancers are remembered frequently as a way to keep tap dance essence alive.

The close relationship between tap community and tradition can carry assumptions that tap dance is an antiquated form. The idea that there is a tendency

¹⁴ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 6

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 334

to be stuck in the past and predestinated to be forgotten are usual affirmations that the tap community has heard from the media and dance critics since 1950s, when tap dance suffered a recognizable decline of popularity and performance opportunities on film and on stage. Constance Valis Hill writes that tap history scholarship has presented various explanations for this decline, “some say it was the shift in aesthetic preference from tap dance to a new style of choreography in Broadway musicals.”¹⁶ Others point out to the appearance of a new musical style, the bebop, which due to “its complexity, was insistent on being music for listening,”¹⁷ as opposed to music for dancing. Therefore, scholars agree that, during the period between 1950s and 1970s, people weren’t listening to jazz music anymore and were watching fewer tap dance performances.

However, even after 1970s when tap overcame the popularity and opportunities issues, most dance critics of the twenty-first century frequently express their concern about tap dance underdevelopment and the constant threat of tap’s death. Joan Acocella and Claudia La Rocco, for example, affirm tap dance is “unquestionably in dire straits”¹⁸ due to choreographers’ persistence on group pieces. They argue “tap is fundamentally a solo form”¹⁹ because it should honor its traditions and be only improvised. On the other hand, tap dance critic

¹⁶ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 168

¹⁷ Ibid, 174

¹⁸ La Rocco, Claudia. “Syncopated Tap Rhythms Tattooed Onto the Floor” In *The New York Times*. July 10, 2011

¹⁹ Acocella, Joan. “Talking Steps” In *New Yorker*. January 12, 2004.

Bryan Seibert points out that tap's vulnerability is consequence of choreographers and tap dancers lack of innovative ideas:

Why can't they [tap dancers] use their bodies with fuller and more articulate expressiveness and coordination, as in other forms of dance? Why can't they be more poetically suggestive and structurally sophisticated, as in other forms of choreography?²⁰

Some dance critics believe tap dance should emphasize tradition and focus on solos and improvisation, which was a popular performance pattern on minstrel, vaudeville, and Broadway stages. Others argue choreographers should engage with innovative choreographic concepts in order to increase tap dance popularity and strengthen its relevance as a performing art. Thus, the dichotomy intrinsic to discourse of dance writing reproduces the polarized idea of tradition as opposite to innovation, and don't recognize that tap dance developed its aesthetic within the dialogue between nostalgic and cutting-edge moments.

The birth of something new informed by the past

Until the first-half of the twentieth century, the most traditional choreographic configurations were solos, duets and chorus lines. After the sixties postmodern artistic movement, tap dance makers were influenced by new perspectives about dance, which culminated in inquiries about *what is dance* and *what is tap*. A group of young female choreographers were responsible for raising questions and challenging tap dance choreographic pattern. In 1970s, Brenda Bufalino, Lynn Dally, Anita Feldman, Jane Goldberg, and Linda Sohl-Donnell

²⁰ Seibert, Bryan. *What The Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), 539

developed groundbreaking concepts of tap choreography, which places them as the main characters of the Tap Renaissance – “the birth of something new informed by the past.”²¹

According to Anita Feldman, “tap creators melded complex foot rhythms with different styles of movement and music to originate new forms.”²² The choreographic and aesthetic innovations of the avant-garde female choreographers combined “solo and group improvisation with composed, highly choreographed dances.”²³ The emphasis on different forms of crafting choreography opened doors to challenge traditional patterns, which was crucial for the development of choreographic studies in tap dance today.

A tap dance tradition related to gender, race, and training was also challenged and questioned in 1970s by Bufalino, Dally, Feldman, Goldberg, and Sohl-Donnell. In tap’s historical narrative, segregation, racism, misogyny and bigotry were aspects of its development as an American vernacular dance form. African slaves were forbidden to play their native drums^{iv}, blackface minstrels’ performances gained popularity, and the roles of female tappers were exclusive to “chorus girl, partner to, Queen of.”^v As consequence of the social context, racial and gender issues created divisions in tap dance.

During early twentieth century, the segregated America developed two separated styles and aesthetics. Rhythm tap was an art limited to black dancers,

²¹ Seibert. *What The Eye Hears*, 393

²² Feldman, Anita. *Inside Tap: Technique and Improvisation for Today’s Tap Dancer* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1996), 11

²³ Bufalino, Brenda. “More Than a Novelty” In *Dance Magazine*. August 31, 2016

and Broadway tap featured predominantly white performers. More than racial lines, the distinctions were along rhythmic and aesthetic sensibilities. The African-American hoofers privileged self-expression, improvisation, and syncopation, while white tap dancers focused on entertainment, choreography, and regular rhythm. Besides style, segregation has also affected the way tap dance was passed on to next generations, through teaching or stealing steps. “While the majority of white professional dancers in New York City learned to tap dance in the studios, [...] black males learned to tap dance on their own, in the dance hall or on the street, where dancing hotly contested.”²⁴ Hence, the racial conflicts of twentieth century molded aesthetic and teaching characteristics of tap dance.

Furthermore, the misogynist environment of American society has also influenced tap, once the male predominance onstage was massive until mid-century. Women were considered weak and “lacked the physical strength needed to perform the rhythm-driven piston steps, multiple-wing steps, and flash and acrobatic steps symbolized the (male) tap virtuoso’s finish to a routine.”²⁵ In the 1970s, through influence of the second-wave of feminist movement^{vi}, Bufalino, Dally, Feldman, Goldberg, and Sohl-Donnell questioned gender stereotypes in tap dance.

Hill explains how those young white women have challenged tap dance’s racial and gender conventions when they “sought out black male hoofers of the rhythm tap tradition as teachers and forged professional relationships with

²⁴ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 87

²⁵ *Ibid*, 3

them.”²⁶ The white female students and the African American male rhythm masters were open to exchange their passion for tap dance. Their interest and respect with each other’s visions of tap dancing was definitive to assert the sense of community in the genre, as well to strengthen the tap renaissance movement. Masters such as Gregory Hines and Charles “Honi” Coles were important leaders of tap community during the 1970s, in particular due to their mentorship and support to the young female choreographers.

Besides the rhythm-tap masters’ guidance, most of the relevant female choreographers were college-educated with training in modern dance, which has influenced innovative approaches to tap choreography. As Hill mentions, this modern background has allowed some choreographers to explore

tap in space, time, and energy, as well as architectural formations of dancing bodies. Others had been influenced by the postmodern dance experimentalism of the 1960s and 1970s, which stripped dance of its theatrical accouterments for more formal and pure-rhythm expressivity. Still others approached tap choreography as a musical composition with melodic and lengthier compositions that relied less on the structure and length of jazz standards.²⁷

Therefore, the tap renaissance period represented more than a revival of a vernacular art form. For the development of tap dance aesthetic, the decade of 1970 became “a period of great individuality, resilience, and experimentation – a decade when women, gay people, and racial and ethnic minorities began to embrace identity politics, a time when disillusion fed a healthy skepticism of

²⁶ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 229

²⁷ *Ibid*, 261

authority.”²⁸ Bufalino and Dally, among other female choreographers, approached tap choreography through a completely different perspective that had been influenced by the tradition of rhythm-tap.²⁹

The healthy skepticism shown by female tap dancers during the 1970s was determinant to widen the range of possibilities for women. For the first time in tap history, women were placed as protagonists, on and offstage. The female choreographers defied stereotypes and challenged who was producing, creating, and most important, who was performing rhythm-tap. “If tap dancing in the twentieth century was considered to be “a man’s game,” it was also a woman’s mission.”³⁰

Unquestionably, the spectrum of possibilities for female tap dancers became broader after the 1970s. With the understanding that gender stereotypes are socially constructed, tap dance field echoes the stereotypical characteristics linked to feminine. According to scholar Mary Kite, the traits traditionally associated with women are emotional, devoted, gentle, petite, pretty, and sexy. In particular during tap’s early history, the stereotype established and reinforced about female tap dancers reiterates Kite’s analysis. Women were considered by the male gaze physically unable to perform flashy steps^{vii}, and lacked of competitor spirit to engage in tap challenges.^{viii} Moreover, female tap dancers

²⁸ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 230

²⁹ Ibid, 261

³⁰ Ibid, 4

were constantly sexualized, and, with rare exceptions, were placed as *partner of* or backup chorus girls.

The relevance of the avant-garde women from 1970s is categorical when analyzing through viewpoint of gender-equality. Bufalino, Dally, Feldman, Goldberg, and Sohl-Donnell confronted feminine stereotypes through the aesthetic developed in their choreographies. The arise of their particular approach to tap choreography was a reaction to “the prevalent attitude by male teachers to “look” feminine by purposely adapting costume and rhythmic styles that was anti-feminine.”³¹ Moreover, Hill highlights “the creative process itself – the aesthetic choices made by those women choreographers refashioning old materials in the then-feminist vein.”³² The author explains that the female choreographers rejected high-heeled shoes and chorus line costumes because it “directed audiences’ focus to thighs, buttocks, and breasts of the female dancer, and had the effect of making all dancers the same dancer, all women the same woman.”³³ As they denied this stereotypical look, they have also challenged choreographic patterns by exploring a style of tap that Hill describes as “feminine in structure, form, presentation, or rhythmic sensibility.”³⁴

Bufalino was obvious in her rejection of the flimsy costume often used in Hollywood films and Broadway shows. One of her forms of resistance was to switch “the high-heel tap shoe for the low-heel oxford, and the co-option of the

³¹ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 4

³² *Ibid*, 271

³³ *Ibid*, 253

³⁴ *Ibid*, 271

men' tuxedo as her signature costume, which would establish her iconic image as a virtuoso woman rhythm-tap soloist."³⁵ Led by Bufalino, most women opted for low-heeled shoes, which tore apart female stereotypes.

Hill explains the uniqueness of the works produced by the female choreographers during the tap resurgence. By quoting tap dancer Katherine Kramer, the author mentions some predominant characteristics:

the process of choreographing suggested a less competitive interaction among dancers, less of an orientation toward flash and gimmicks. In some cases, compositions made by women were more melodic and less focused solely on rhythm; often, there was a more emotional and dramatic line in the choreography.³⁶

Bufalino's choreographies fit into a less competitive and more melodic style. Seibert refers to her as a choreographer who envisioned tap as music and "wanted to transform tap into a concert form."³⁷ In 1986, she co-founded the American Tap Dance Orchestra, a company with whom Bufalino could investigate tap dance in a big band or orchestra structure. She divided "her group into smaller groups, like the trumpet and saxophone sections,"³⁸ and explored canon, counterpoint, call-and-response, and unison precision dancing, with subtle phrasing of shading, crescendos, and decrescendos.³⁹ Seibert complements explaining how Bufalino developed "the idea of rhythmically independent lines

³⁵ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 253

³⁶ *Ibid*, 271

³⁷ Seibert. *What The Eye Hears*, 383

³⁸ *Ibid*, 435

³⁹ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 264

acting in concert,”⁴⁰ meaning that different rhythms were played at the same time in perfect congruence. She often broke down the structure and presented the rhythmic phrases one at a time, and then she would build it up. In order to avoid audible and visual confusion to the audience, her trick was “to exploit the possibilities for differentiation - loud and soft, busy and spare, bass and treble - to design phrases that stay distinct yet mesh.”⁴¹ The author recognizes Bufalino’s rare gift as a dance maker, as well as the complexity regarding the creative process and the performance of her pieces.

While Bufalino focused on layers of music phrases to build a tap orchestra, Lynn Dally had a “penchant for full-bodied movement and a luscious exploration of space.”⁴² Dally is the founder of the Jazz Tap Ensemble, a collective of jazz percussionists – musicians and tap dancers – that ventured “into the fairly uncommon territory of simultaneous exploration of jazz music and modern dance traditions in a new approach to tap dance.”⁴³ As Hill explains, Dally’s innovative style of tap choreography that fused modern dance and jazz music resulted in a “genuine integration of movement and music, which was at the core of the tap dance tradition.”⁴⁴ Thus, Dally’s innovative point of view to choreography reaffirmed an important aspect of tap tradition: the relationship between rhythm and movement.

⁴⁰ Seibert. *What The Eye Hears*, 436

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 266

⁴³ Ibid, 242

⁴⁴ Ibid, 244

High-heeled Hoofers

According to scholar Mark Knowles, tap dance is “a form of dancing in which rhythmical sounds are made by striking the feet against the floor.”⁴⁵ Therefore, tap dance can also be understood as an exchange between sound and movement: at the same time that we can see the music, we can hear the dancing. Seibert explains that this duality between music and movement results in a tension between what it is seen and heard in tap dance. “In practice, dancers tend to lean toward one pole or the other, emphasizing sound over movement or the reverse.”⁴⁶ Hence, the peculiarity of choreographing tap dance is to create a balanced relationship between visual and audible elements.

Dormeshia Sumbry-Edwards is an illustration of a tap dancer able to create the equilibrium between sound and movement. Considered by tap community “the greatest tap dancer/hoofer alive right now,”⁴⁷ Sumbry-Edwards is a black female artist who promoted discussions about gender equality in tap dance. She “became the only woman to join the touring production of *Bring In ‘Da Noise, Bring In ‘Da Funk*,”⁴⁸ a 1990s Broadway musical choreographed by Savion Glover that marked tap dance history by incorporating a rough, raw, hard-hitting style of tap dancing inspired by hip-hop culture. Scholar Jenai Cutcher describes Sumbry-Edwards “wearing men's clothing and assuming a more rugged attitude and

⁴⁵ Knowles, Mark. *The Tap Dance Dictionary*. (North Carolina: McFarland, 1998), 211

⁴⁶ Seibert. *What The Eye Hears*, 5

⁴⁷ Theys, Emily. “Tap’s Leading Lady” In *Dance Magazine*. April 26, 2011

⁴⁸ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 324

posture”⁴⁹ when she first stepped into the show. Few years later, in the 2003 tour of *Noise/Funk*, she played female characters, which became a venue to reaffirm women’s potential to be hoofers in high-heels.

Sumbry-Edwards reopened the debate about gender association and stereotypical feminine characteristics present in tap. By bringing the high-heels back, instead of reaffirming stereotypes, she opened more possibilities for female tap dancers. In 2006, she created a new course in her Harlem Tap Studio called “Mastering Femininity in Tap.” Hill explains that the technique of dancing in heels that Sumbry-Edwards developed was female-centered. “The approach to steps that in the rhythm tap-hitting style had mandated a downward-driving, piston-driven attack, for the female in the heel, had to be strategically reconceptualized.”⁵⁰ In fact, her course was about redefining the understanding of femininity in tap through a revolutionary approach to technique that didn’t emphasize stereotypical feminine traits.

Therefore, Sumbry-Edwards revolutionized tap field by reappropriating heels as a possibility, not as an obligation. Seibert argues she “has reclaimed the taboo footwear for women of her generation and younger. [...] The heels are an option, as are flats; they are part of an array of choices that encompass hard-hitting aggression, coquetry, and asexuality.”⁵¹ On the other hand, Cutcher

⁴⁹ Cutcher, Jenai. “Dancing Like a Girl” In *Dance Magazine*. May, 2006

⁵⁰ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 328

⁵¹ Seibert, *What The Eye Hears*, 535

emphasizes the initial rejection that female artists from 1970s and 80s demonstrated against the resurgence of high-heels.

Many women fought long and hard to come down from them and be taken seriously as both dancers and musicians. Many emotions and opinions are wrapped up in this footwear comeback, but the heels now serve a higher purpose. Whether it's for the look, the sound, or the fun, whether a fashion, political, or historical statement, the shoes cannot be ignored. The high heels are tangible evidence that women are exploring what it means to be a woman within the art form.⁵²

While “black women hadn’t played a larger role in the tap revival,”⁵³ in the 2000s, Sumbry-Edwards, Ayodele Casel and Chloe Arnold led the generation of hoofers in high-heels. “By the first decade of the twenty-first century, their progressive century-long struggle to gain both authority and virtuosity, the women in tap had broken new grounds.”⁵⁴ Although Michelle Dorrance is not a woman of color, she is equally as poignant as a hooper with her unique, tomboy style.

This generation focused on embracing the new role of women that challenge the idea of tap as man’s game. Female tap dancers have demonstrated improvisational skills and the ability to execute all the steps of male tap masters in high-heeled shoes.

What they achieved by feminizing the rhythm-tap lexicon may not have ended the century-long male dictatorship in dance direction and tap choreography, but it foretold a radical shift in thinking for millennium-age women: to achieve virtuosity and authority in the form, they no longer needed to dance *like* a man, but *as* a woman.⁵⁵

⁵² Cutcher, *Dancing Like a Girl*

⁵³ Seibert, *What The Eye Hears*, 482

⁵⁴ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 351

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 324

Similar to the intention of women in the 1970s, the twenty-first century female tap dancers aim “definition apart from men but as equal participants in the American dream.”⁵⁶ The women’s agenda assisted the tap dance field to establish a sense of community, to not only co-exist with the difference, but also to share, enjoy, and celebrate one another, as Hill describes:

A broad agreement exists among women in tap concerning inclusiveness; despite varying styles (high-heeled or low), (re)production choices, musical aesthetics, and dance styles or tradition, a sense of sisterhood prevailed, even if imperfectly realized within a mainstream of activism marked by inclusivity.⁵⁷

Within a more inclusive environment, choreographers like Arnold and Dorrance found their space in the field and their unique artistic voices. They have invigorated the form by “sharing tap with new audiences, involving young dancers, and pushing out the boundaries of tap choreography.”⁵⁸ With consciousness to “look back as it moves ahead,”⁵⁹ their distinctive approaches to choreography illustrate possibilities in which tap dancing can evolve based on the relationship between tradition and innovation.

The following chapters are analyses of Chloe Arnold and Michelle Dorrance’s choreographic approaches, influences, and aesthetics developed with their tap companies, Syncopated Ladies and Dorrance Dance, respectively. It is not my intention to compare or analyze both tap choreographers in a vertical point of view. Instead, I will critically describe the specific works of these two tap artists

⁵⁶ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 351

⁵⁷ Ibid, 352

⁵⁸ Ibid, 332

⁵⁹ Ibid, 360

independently by placing their different aesthetics, women's empowerment and intriguing artistic sensibility, in a horizontal relationship. Through these analyses, I aim to reflect on the notion of innovation in tap dance choreography today.

CHAPTER II

Chloe Arnold: Women's Empowerment

It is possible to summarize the choreographic works of Chloe Arnold with the Syncopated Ladies by two words: women's empowerment. The Female Tap Dance Band from Los Angeles, CA wants to bring tap dance back to pop culture and give women a voice in tap field.⁶⁰

The Syncopated Ladies, founded in 2003 by Chloe Arnold, was "built on a value system of sisterhood, solidarity, unity, and lifting each other up."⁶¹ During a jam session, Arnold realized there were only women tapping on that night, "which is unusual when it comes to freestyle/improvisational tap, that is typically men."⁶²

Arnold then invited those talented tap dancers to start a group, which later would become the Syncopated Ladies. Arnold explains that it wasn't until 2012 when they started to make videos. "I told the ladies that I wanted to rock out in tap shoes, and it was then that we made our first video, combining tap with our favorite songs and artists - incorporating film and dance."⁶³ Within dance and film, Arnold decided to use the Internet to popularize tap dance for general audiences by interpreting songs of famous pop singers.

The influences of Latin style, hip-hop, and African dance are explicit in Syncopated Ladies' choreographies. The initiation of movements from the hips, and

⁶⁰ Lee, Ronda. "Syncopated Ladies: Fierce Feminine Strong" In *The Huffington Post*. May 25, 2016

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

the awareness of arm moves are important characteristics that Arnold have developed in the search for her voice as a dance maker. The Syncopated Ladies found its unique way of tapping alongside Arnold's own discoveries as a tap soloist. When she recognized that she wanted "to be able to express different moves, to be hard core with a feminine touch,"⁶⁴ Arnold defined the aesthetic of her group.

By "feminine touch," I believe Arnold references to sensuality as part of the process of changing power relations. Different from the stereotypical idea of a female body sensualizing exclusivity to the male gaze, Arnold develops choreographies that explore sensuality as an opportunity to own and celebrate women's bodies and desires. The aesthetic presented by the Syncopated Ladies enhances and empowers female tap dancers because it shifts the power relation between genders, particularly about sensuality. Instead of focusing on the male gaze and its stereotypical expectations of sensual women, Arnold empowers female tap dancers by offering the possibility to explore sensuality as an aesthetic element.

The group exhibits impressive technique and improvisation skills, which confirm them as hoofers and as some of the best tap dancers of their generation. The Syncopated Ladies are the women's force in tap dance today and they are aware of the importance they carry as the front line of this art form. "Women have been marginalized and really not adequately acknowledged in our field, but we're here to change,"⁶⁵ affirmed Arnold. Through a choreographic proposal that empowers female

⁶⁴ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 327

⁶⁵ Peltier, Claire. "These Tap-Dancing Women Get In 'Formation' And Perform a Hard-Hitting Beyoncé Number" In *A Plus*. March 15, 2016

tap dancers, the Syncopated Ladies encourage women in tap to equally explore sensuality and rhythm-driven steps. The group illustrates a possibility of women's identity in tap dance nowadays. Arnold develops a cutting-edge aesthetic that empowers female dancers through the embodiment of sensuality, dynamism, and strength within tap.

Along with their consciousness about women's roles in tap dancing, the Syncopated Ladies also are aware of their responsibility in promoting traditions of a dance style that is part of African-American culture. Arnold explains how she feels "honored to carry on this traditional art form as a black woman, sharing with the world that our art form is alive, well, and on the cutting edge."⁶⁶ Arnold clarifies that while they want to preserve and promote tap traditions, their mission as a female tap band is to keep the form fresh and "invite young people to vibe to it and groove to it and relate to it."⁶⁷ Therefore, it was through a balanced combination between traditional tap fundamentals and cutting-edge aesthetic that the Syncopated Ladies have experienced success and recognition inside the dance field.

The Syncopated Ladies released their first music video in 2013, and since then they uploaded more than 10 high-quality dance films using different pop artists' songs, such as Rihanna, Katy Perry, Justin Timberlake, Fetty Wap, Prince, Andra Day, and Ed Sheeran. Still, their main music choice and inspiration falls over Beyoncé's works. In order to identify an aesthetic developed by Arnold with the

⁶⁶ Peltier, Claire. "These Tap-Dancing Women Get In 'Formation' And Perform a Hard-Hitting Beyoncé Number" In *A Plus*. March 15, 2016

⁶⁷ Williams, Ionen. *Meet Chloe Arnold's Syncopated Ladies*. Accessed May 30, 2017 <https://helloworldbeautiful.com/2725516/chloe-arnolds-syncopated-ladies-tap-group/>

Syncopated Ladies, I analyze three of their most popular videos: “Beyoncé Tap Salute”, with 960,000 views on YouTube, “Formation”, with 6,800,000 views on Facebook, “Syncopated Ladies Salutes a Legend”, with 8,200,000 views on YouTube.

Analysis of “Beyoncé Tap Salute”

Released on December 12th 2013, “Beyoncé Tap Salute”⁶⁸ is the second music video produced by the Syncopated Ladies. Tapping to the song “End of Time” by Beyoncé, the six female tap dancers combine sensuality with advanced tap combinations. Arnold’s choreography combines two traits traditionally associated with genders. The quality of torso and arms varies between light, delicate, and powerful, strong movements, which are stereotypically connected with female and male gender, respectively. The balance Arnold builds between light and powerful movements is a result of her aesthetic choice to perform in high-heels steps that are typically associated with men. The Syncopated Ladies perform effortless flash steps,^{ix} rhythm turns,^x and pullback shuffles^{xi} in high-heeled shoes, which confirms women are as strong and skillful as male dancers.

The upper-body movements predominantly explored a medium to large range of movement. Arms tend to be in a ninety-degree relationship with the torso, and the energetic lines go mostly outwards. The influence of African diaspora is noticeable. With arm and torso movements, Arnold references traditional dances of tap dance

⁶⁸ Arnold, Chloe. *Beyoncé Tap Salute*. Accessed June 19, 2017
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KWa-MDA2rYM>

roots through a pop culture approach. The blend between West-African aesthetic and pop music becomes more evident with the use of hip-hop movements.

The hip-hop influence is broad and includes more than dance moves. Seibert compares Syncopated Ladies' costumes, make-up and hairstyle with hip-hop aesthetic, specifically the one in Beyoncé's shows. The tap dancers "mimic the sexualized moves of Beyoncé backup dancers and dressed for the part, except for the metal on the soles of their shoes."⁶⁹ The women's empowerment is displayed through costumes, choreography and performance, which goes along with the aesthetic of the Beyoncé's song "End of Time."

Arnold doesn't hide her admiration for Beyoncé's work. The choreographer holds a film degree from Columbia University, which allowed her to work as director's assistant on Beyoncé's music video "Upgrade U." On this opportunity "she got to witness the pop singers meticulous work, up close, which proved to be a life-changing experience."⁷⁰ Beyoncé is not only an audible and visual inspiration, but also a supporter of Syncopated Ladies' work. She has shared on her Facebook page two of their videos, which boosted the popularity of the group and, consequently, promoted tap dance with new audiences.

Arnold perceives Beyoncé's work more than as an inspiration. The choreographies performed by the pop singer are reproduced in Arnold's creative works. In "Beyoncé Tap Salute," some choreographic characteristics are very similar

⁶⁹ Seibert, Bryan. "Syncopated Ladies and Beanteez'n the Beat Revel in Tap" In *The New York Times*. November 10, 2014

⁷⁰ Williams, Ionen. *Meet Chloe Arnold's Syncopated Ladies*. Accessed May 30, 2017 <https://helloworldbeautiful.com/2725516/chloe-arnolds-syncopated-ladies-tap-group/>

to Beyoncé concert choreography⁷¹ for the song “End of Time.” By analyzing both choreographies, I identified movements from the original dance that were identically replicated in Arnold’s piece: arms thrown front and back with torso forward, side head toss, tiny walk on balls of the feet to stage right and then to stage left, claps above the head, and bent knees coming in and outwards. Some of the movement phrases above were incorporated in the tap piece exactly at the same part of the music as the original choreography.

Analysis of “Formation”

Released on March 13th 2016, “Formation”⁷² is another Syncopated Ladies video that reproduces Beyoncé’s original choreography. Arnold’s choreographic approach is very similar to the one developed in the iconic Beyoncé’s music video Formation.⁷³ Arnold does not only use the visual and conceptual ideas present in Beyoncé’s production as inspirations, but she replicates choreographic patterns like entrances, formations, and some specific movements.

“Formation” produces an intense and empowered feeling, which is the first similarity between Syncopated Ladies and Beyoncé’s music videos. The lighting design facilitates to establish the strong mood by creating shadowy scenes, which appears in both videos. The look in Syncopated Ladies production is similar to the

⁷¹ Grant, Chris. *End of time Live*. Accessed June 19, 2017

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUA_9Ma_bOI

⁷² Arnold, Chloe. *Formation*. Accessed June 20, 2017

<https://www.facebook.com/SyncopatedLadies/videos/v1.308391436241797/959894680785350/?type=1>

⁷³ Matsoukas, Melina. *Beyoncé – Formation*. Accessed 20 June, 2017

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDZJPJV__bQ

design of Beyoncé’s production, specifically when the dancers are inside of an empty pool. Moreover, the aesthetic of the costumes are alike. The Syncopated Ladies stylish jeans outfit is clearly based on the clothes of the scene at the parking lot in Beyoncé’s video.

A relevant aspect that connects both videos is the casting. Arnold and Beyoncé chose black female bodies to be protagonists. This similarity is important in social and artistic perspectives. I appreciate Arnold’s respect and awareness in preserving the main message in Beyoncé’s lyrics of Formation. The song celebrates African-American heritage and womanhood. The empowerment of black women that is highlighted by the lyrics could only be fully represented by African-American female dancers.

The racial and gender subject is intrinsic to tap dance history. As discussed previously, social issues, such as “bigotry, racism, and segregation, were factors – in retrospect, both blessings and curses – in tap’s evolution as an American vernacular dance form.”⁷⁴ In light of the notion that tap dance marks a lineage of African American culture in America, Beyoncé’s music and Arnold’s choreography advocate for black women’s artistic space.

In addition to casting, costume and lighting aspects that both videos share, the similarity between Syncopated Ladies’ version of “Formation” and Beyoncé’s original music video is also present in the spatial and time structures developed by

⁷⁴ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 4

Arnold. It caught my attention that both explore unison, canons, line formation, facing front and back, and entrances of dancers.

More over to choreographic patterns, Arnold also reproduces specific arm movements from Beyoncé's video. The most evident is the arm combination with short pauses in specific poses, like forearm crossed in front of chest and arm straighten to low diagonal. The sequence is a useful example to understand how Arnold connects movements from original choreographies to tap dancing. In Beyoncé's video, this combination focuses on the arms while the legs take small steps on the place. Arnold substitutes the steps for fast paddles^{xii} and shuffles^{xiii} sequences, whereas following the rhythm and repetitions established by original choreography. Therefore, the choreographer combines the arm combination from Beyoncé's video with the tap dancing steps she created.

It seems Arnold studies the choreographies in which she will base her own. I argue that she is conscious and mindful of each choice she reproduces from original choreographies because the similarities are apparent in different choreographic aspects at many moments. Arnold's option to bring together tap dancing and the aesthetic of original music videos goes along with Syncopated Ladies intention to insert tap dance to pop culture.

Analysis of “Syncopated Ladies Tap Dance Salutes a Legend”

“Syncopated Ladies Tap Dance Salutes a Legend”⁷⁵ is Arnold’s tap version of “When Doves Cry” by Prince. Released on May 22nd 2016, this is the most popular Syncopated Ladies’ video, with more than 8 million views, and is a tribute to the pop artist right after he passed away. Different from the two choreographies analyzed previously, where Arnold creates based on the original music video, in “Syncopated Ladies Tap Dance Salutes a Legend” she uses as inspiration the 1980’s jazz aesthetic.

Arnold references the 80s through soundtrack, costumes, and movements. Prince was an important pop star singer of that decade. Nothing is more appropriated for a Prince tribute than to use one of his most famous songs from that time, “When Doves Cry.” The costume design references 1980s gym outfits with grey leotards, tights, and legwarmers, which also reminds me the movie *Flashdance*. As another reference to the movie, the choreography emphasizes head rolls, snaps, hip movements, and even a brief exploration of low level. The jazzy movements added a sensual approach to tap dance. The hip initiation to execute brushes, shuffles, and steps illustrates how Arnold explores sensuality within tap.

In “Syncopated Ladies Tap Dance Salutes a Legend,” the seven dancers perform in constant unison, facing forward, and with the same spatial distribution. Even though Arnold always presented herself as the principal dancer, the one who is in the center and has the longest solos, her presence as the main character is more evident in this video. The absence of solos and unchanged formation facilitated to

⁷⁵ Arnold, Chloe. *Syncopated Ladies Tap Dance Salutes a Legend*. Accessed June 22, 2017 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U86gQ_9lvO8

highlight Arnold. In previous works, each dancer usually improvises one to two bars, which provides the audience a chance to defocus from Arnold's central figure and watch other bodies moving. Additionally, the variety of spatial distribution collaborates for the decentralization of the choreography because it allows the audience to watch dancers different in space arrangements. Hence, with combination of continuous unison and constant formation, the audience's focus is drawn to the central figure, Arnold.

Still, the choreographic aspect more evident in "Syncopated Ladies Tap Dance Salutes a Legend" is related to rhythmic composition. Arnold is a specialist to develop rhythmical phrases that enhance both, the music and the tap dancing. Arnold selects songs that have space to tap dance, which highlight the sounds produced by tap shoes. With Prince's song "When Doves Cry", she based her composition on the basic rhythm pattern played by the drum synthesizer. It is repetitive, constant throughout the song, and has few variations. Arnold composes rhythms that sound in complete agreement with the pattern. Though, that doesn't mean she only follows the music. There are moments when her rhythms are syncopated, or it reproduces exactly the basic pattern or melody; others she creates a conversation between taps and music by exploring call-and-response. She composed qualified and intriguing rhythmical structures that result in a thorough blend between Prince's music and the one produced by Syncopated Ladies.

By analyzing the Syncopated Ladies' videos, I identify the apparent parallel between Arnold's choreographic aesthetic and commercial, mainstream dance. Her

voice as a dance maker is grounded on the interpretation of various pop artists by borrowing choreographic aspects from original music videos. Furthermore, Arnold uses the Internet as a venue to reach to general audience and advocate for women's spaces in the tap dance field. Therefore, Arnold works to expand tap audiences and empower female tap dancers by creating an analogy between her choreography and the mainstream culture. Her strategy is to approach tap dance through an aesthetic that is immensely popular and uses "narrative that engages with gender equality and female empowerment,"⁷⁶ as also established by female pop singer Beyoncé.

The innovative aspect of Arnold's choreography is not entirely on the connection she builds between tap dance and mainstream music. In tap dance history, around 1920-30s, jazz was the most popular genre of music and the Big Bands were inseparably partners of tap dancers. Thus, Arnold is reproducing a concept traditionally used by choreographers in early twentieth century.

I identify as cutting-edge in her creative work the approach to tap dance that exalt women by daring gender stereotypes. In Arnold's choreographies, female body is celebrated, sensuality emphasized, and women's empowerment promoted. The Syncopated Ladies have demonstrated that female tap dancers are technically equal to men, not by imitating the "male style," but highlighting their personal characteristics and desires.

⁷⁶ Hansen, Kai. *Empowered or Objectified? Personal Narrative and Audiovisual Aesthetics in Beyoncé's Partition*. (*Popular Music Society*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2017), 167

CHAPTER III

Michelle Dorrance: Intriguing Artistic Sensibility

In 2010, dance scholar Constance Hill asked: “there has been talk among the new generation of [tap] dancers. Is Michelle Dorrance the next one?”⁷⁷ Five years later, Michelle Dorrance was the first tap dancer to ever receive the MacArthur “Genius” Grant by the MacArthur Foundation. This award not only confirms the quality of Dorrance’s work, but also is an exceptional acknowledgment of tap dance and its long overdue respect and infinite reach.⁷⁸ By offering this award to Dorrance, The MacArthur Foundation recognized tap dance as an art form relevant to both past and contemporary settings, its future is full of possibilities and innovations, and Dorrance’s work is an illustration of a cutting-edge tap aesthetic.

Marked by critics as the most interesting tap choreographer to have sprung up in years⁷⁹, Michelle Dorrance is the artistic director of Dorrance Dance, a tap dance company based in New York City and founded in 2011. Since then, the company has performed at venues including Jacob’s Pillow, The Joyce Theater, The Kennedy Center, New York City Center, Vail International Dance Festival, Fira Tarega (Spain), Staatstheater Darmstadt (Germany), and Sadler’s Wells (UK). Dorrance Dance primarily aims to explore tap dance in a new approach without losing its

⁷⁷ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 351

⁷⁸ Dorrance, Michelle. *So very lucky, and still need you*. Accessed December 5, 2015 <http://www.dorrancedance.com>

⁷⁹ Seibert, Brian. “A Time for Farewells and Comebacks: Brian Seibert on the Dance Highlights of 2013” In *The New York Times*, December 2013.

roots.⁸⁰ As a dance maker, Dorrance aims to honor tap dance's history in a fresh and compelling context, not by stripping the form of its tradition, but by pushing it rhythmically, aesthetically and conceptually.⁸¹ Her work combines the musicality of tap with visual aspects of theatrical devices, by using her deep understanding of the technique and history of tap dancing to deconstruct and reimagine tap's artistic possibilities.⁸²

Dorrance is cognizant of her deconstruction and reconstruction of the tap genre and, in this way, is influenced by concepts of contemporary^{xiv} dance. The impact of contemporary dance in Dorrance's work appears in her sensibility to spatial exploration and attentiveness to quality of movement, both of which are also present in other dance influences, including ballet, modern, and hip-hop. The range of Dorrance's interests – groups, space, virtuosity, and specific embodiment – reflect in her choreography. Dorrance explains in an interview to Jim Cotter that the contemporary dance aspects of her work “might be a part of why it feels innovative, but true is all rooted historically inside the form.”⁸³

Dance critic Judith Mackrell points out that Dorrance has “her own invitingly theatrical approach. She brings a sensibility and a skill set from contemporary dance, choreographing not only for the feet but for the legs, arms and torso, so her dancers

⁸⁰ Dorrance, Michelle. *About Us*. Accessed July 10, 2017
<http://www.dorrancedance.com>

⁸¹ *Ibid*

⁸² Foundation, MacArthur. *Michelle Dorrance*. Accessed July 3, 2017
<https://www.macfound.org/fellows/935/>

⁸³ Cotter, Jim. Michelle Dorrance on Aging, Improvising, and the Physical Demands of Tap. Accessed July 19, 2017
<http://why.org/cms/articulate/michelle-dorrance-on-aging-improvising-and-the-physical-demands-of-tap/>

throw out an expressive variety of shapes as they tap.”⁸⁴ It is important to emphasize that these movements are not created disconnected from the footwork. It is a reflection of the groove and musicality performed by the feet, almost like a reverberation of tap shoes sounds through the whole body.

Dorrance’s approach to movement is not the usual relaxed, free and self-expressive upper body. Dorrance is very specific in relation to the quality of movement, sharp, weighted, soft, or light, and those qualities are translated to the sounds produced, creating a connection between what you see and what you hear.

The intriguing rhythmical phrases and the exceptional tap dance technique that Dorrance Dance presents on stage must be highlighted. The basic characteristics of tap are strongly present in Dorrance’s choreographies, such as being grounded, improvisation, and syncopation. Tap dance’s roots are represented through the technique and the grooves explored in her shows. It seems to be relevant to Dorrance to be considered as a musician. She is an expert on musical theory, as much as she is on tap dance technique. This provides her the understanding, (music knowledge) and the instrument (technical skills) to create intriguing and complex rhythmic phrases.

Seibert describes Dorrance’s work unique because “she gives visual expression to zones of feeling that in tap are usually expressed only musically.”⁸⁵ Dorrance seems to create a perfect balance between visual and musical approaches while developing conceptual, rhythmical, and aesthetical ideas. This balance confirms

⁸⁴ Mackrell, Judith. “Tap-dancing Dynamo Michelle Dorrance Stamps on a Man’s World” In *The Guardian*. July 2017

⁸⁵ Seibert, Bryan. “Queen of Tap Hits the Floor Stomping: Michelle Dorrance in ‘The Blues Project’ at Jacob’s Pillow” In *The New York Times*. July 2013.

that she sees tap dance as an interchangeable art form between music and dance. She considers tap as a conversation between music and dance. Then, Dorrance is able to easily communicate to audience's eyes and ears.

The analysis will focus on Dorrance Dance's newest show, "ETM: Double Down", which had its premiere on April 2016 at the Joyce Theater/NYC. This analysis is based on my experiences as an audience member in two different showings: the work in-progress at the Jacob's Pillow 2016 Creative Development Residency, and the performance in New York City at the Joyce Theater. In addition to those perspectives, I also had access to *ETM: The Initial Approach* footage, which was the first show created by Dorrance in collaboration with tap dancer and co-choreographer Nicholas Van Young that explored the blending between tap dance and technology. All these materials were extremely important to provide me different perspectives of Dorrance's creative process and her aesthetic.

Analysis of "ETM: Double Down"

"ETM: Double Down" is a further development of the concepts presented in Dorrance Dance's show *ETM: The Initial Approach*. Electronic Tap Music uses electronic wooden platforms as tap instruments, designed by tap dancer Nicholas Van Young, that creates on stage a score that is not simply danced to, but played by company's feet.

Michelle Dorrance, in collaboration with Young, digs deeply into the range of possibilities in being both dancer and musician, and with artistic sensibility, she explores the visual and the aural, the acoustic and the electric, the organic and

inorganic embodiment. Seibert argues “the production works by addition and subtraction: building loop upon musical loop and breaking them down, bringing on more bodies and sending them away.”⁸⁶ Dorrance goes further on the complexity and sophistication of rhythmical patterns and melody design, which are highlighted by the use of technology.

“ETM: Double Down” features seven tap dancers, one B-Girl, three musicians, and forty wooden boards, “each outfitted with sensors that launch into progressions of digital music at the touch of a dancer’s hand or foot.”⁸⁷ The first scene is a passage of all dancers, from one side of stage to the other. This quick section is extremely important to understand Michelle Dorrance’s aesthetic because it presents intriguing aspects that she will explore later in the show: acoustic and electronic, levels, traveling, and quality of movement. In the following scene, each dancer is on wooden platforms, which have different heights. In front of each platform, there are many electronic boards, each one with one kind of tone. Together, the dancers build music as figurative orchestra, using the sound of a single footfall to range from a beat of a drum to a note on an arpeggio.

The show is divided between acoustic and electronic parts. The acoustic section includes both soft shoe and rhythm tap. In the soft shoe choreographies, dancers wear leather shoes instead of the regular tap shoes. Perhaps, the absence of

⁸⁶ Seibert, Bryan. “Review: Dorrance Dance, Where Tap and Computers Intersect” In *The New York Times*. April 27, 2016

⁸⁷ Simon, Lizzie. “Tapping Into an Electronic Sound: ‘ETM: Double Down’ has dancers tapping on boards that play digital music with each step” In *Wall Street Journal*. April 25, 2016

taps makes clearer the attentiveness to the movement of the legs, which bend, twist, and cross. More than that, the quality of movement is also relevant and intensively coached: how the feet touch the floor seems to be important to Dorrance's choreographies. I assume that Dorrance's awareness about the quality of movement is due not exclusively to the visual aesthetic she wants to achieve, but to the audible ideas and concepts she aims to develop. The way the performers feet hit the floor influences the sound they produce.

In the soft shoe section, there is also the body percussion piece. Through claps and stomps, the dancers create a groove that, as an audience member, was impossible not to be involved with. On top of that, Michelle Dorrance does an incredible improvisation during this same section. She demonstrates a keen ability to use her feet as a conversational tool while traveling through space. Simultaneously, she plays with quality of movement and creates elaborated rhythms. However, Harss points out that, even though Michelle Dorrance is an extraordinary tapper, "what stands out most about her company isn't her skill, or the skill of her dancers, but rather the funky individuality they all share. She doesn't seem to have a "type" – the people in her company are all incredibly different, even slightly eccentric."⁸⁸

Dorrance uses the individuality of each dancer as a tool to craft and enrich her choreography. Harss highlights that "the ensembles have a vitality born of individuality. You look forward to the dancers' solos; you know they will have

⁸⁸ Harss, Marina. *Dorrance Dance – ETM: Double Down – New York*. Accessed May 3, 2016 <http://dancetabs.com/2016/04/dorrance-dance-etm-double-down-new-york>

something to say.”⁸⁹ Even when the steps, quality of movement, and mood of the scene are set/rehearsed/planned, each dancer brings their own flavor to the movement, adding to the scene specific and very personal details that make the show more personal and closer to the audience. We can see that those bodies aren’t tap machines; they own each step, and they show their personalities.

Another performance aspect of “ETM: Double Down” is the dancers’ capacity for reproducing complex music scores while fully showing their individual personalities. Dorrance’s choreography explores the contrast between contained and flowing, low and high levels, acoustic and electronic sounds, and rhythmical and melodic phrases, which requires physically and mentally and effort. The piano section is one of the most striking moments of the show due to the concentration required. With twenty electronic boards lined side by side, each board matches to one piano note. Together, dancers reproduce a fast and syncopated music score by stepping the boards. Each dancer is only responsible for two notes (boards), what makes more difficult to play the music flawlessly, since the dancer has to hit the specific note at the exact time. Even with the high-leveled challenged, the dancers looked relax and focused, explored levels and sharp movements while performing difficult choreography.

Harss observes characteristics in Dorrance choreography that cause the division between dancer and musician to disappear. The dance maker “uses a lot of pianissimo and emphasizes dynamic contrast. That way, tap becomes, truly, a

⁸⁹ Harss. *Dorrance Dance – ETM: Double Down – New York*

thrilling form of chamber music.”⁹⁰ Even though the show has numerous choreographic ideas and a quick pace, Dorrance uses her tap dancer instinct of playing with dynamics to carry the audience through an audible and visual experience. “The intensity ebbs and flows, but Dorrance doesn’t bombard the audience. She is a master of nuance.”⁹¹

Dorrance’s ability to play with aural and visual nuances is the innovative aspect of her choreographic work. The artistic sensibility added to a large range of influences and respect for tap legacy result in intriguing aesthetic. Her unique approach to choreography has proved that tap dance can go further in its creative process. The blending with technology she explored in “ETM: Double Down” is one of the many possibilities available to tap: video dance, range of music style, use of whole body, influence of other dance forms, spatial approach, physical contact, and more. The possibilities are endless and Dorrance is one artist who both challenges and respects tradition, by placing tap dance as an innovative art form.

⁹⁰ Harss. *Dorrance Dance – ETM: Double Down – New York*.

⁹¹ Ibid

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this thesis was to clarify and illustrate the relationship between tradition and innovation in tap dance choreography. After critical study of history and choreographic analyses, it has been shown that tap dance aesthetic allows cutting-edge approaches to traditional characteristics of its form. Thus, I identify the dialogue between tradition and innovation as a significant factor when discussing choreographic process in tap dance.

Moreover, the relationship between tradition and innovation in tap embraces social aspects as well. Gender, race, and class issues of American society have affected the development of tap dance. In a dance genre historically dominated by men, I sought to highlight works by female artists that exemplify choreographic possibilities in which tap dancing can evolve based on the relationship between tradition and innovation. With a research scope focused on women, this thesis has also discussed about female role in tap throughout history and how choreographers like Chloe Arnold and Michelle Dorrance have achieved authority and recognition in the form.

Arnold promotes the dialogue between tradition and innovation by celebrating women's empowerment, tap's footwork, and pop music. Her choreographies have demonstrated that female tap dancers are technically equal to men, not by imitating the "male style," but by discovering and owning the perks of being a female tap dancer. On the other hand, Dorrance demonstrate an artistic sensibility that allows her to reimagine tap's choreographic possibilities. She investigates visual nuances such as

quality of movement and spatial exploration, which allows her to push the boundaries of tap aesthetic while honoring tap dance legacy through intricate musically.

Arnold and Dorrance stand for tap dance as an innovative art form. Their different approaches to choreography illustrate the relationship between tradition and innovation in the constitution of tap dance history and aesthetic. The strong and respectful connection between tap community and tradition isn't a resistance to cutting-edge ideas and concepts, as Arnold and Dorrance's works show. Both choreographers ground their creations on the roots of tap by promoting intriguing musicality, complex footwork, and improvisational skills. They offer different perspectives of tradition that cultivates tap as an artistic process. Through their empowered and sensitive points of view, Arnold and Dorrance have consolidated their unique artistic voices, which has opened the range of possibilities in tap choreography for the next generation of female tap choreographers.

PART II

Innovating My Own Choreographic Traditions:

The creative process of *Tuning the Space*

INTRODUCTION

Tuning the Space is the final result of the creative part of my thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts. The 26-minute piece was presented at the MFA Concert *Dynamic Figures: An Evening of Dance* on March 2 and 3, 2018 at Hartwell Theater, Brockport, NY. *Tuning the Space* was performed by undergraduate students from the Department of Dance of SUNY The College at Brockport. The cast consisted of intermediate and advanced tap dancers with strong training in modern dance: Maya Anderson-Grasso, Megan Burgess, Joyce Edward, Alyssa Kube, Sarah Norris, Malena Sullivan, Michelle Parkhurst, and myself.

The creative process started in late August 2017, with meetings three times a week, which included material building workshops, rehearsals, and tap dance technique classes. The building workshops were held during an intensive week of rehearsals in August 2017 before the academic year started. During that week, dancers and I had time to experiment and try out some ideas and choreographic concepts. With the goal to build as a community what it would become *Tuning the Space*, the performers accepted every challenge with open minds and hearts,

which resulted in a creative process enjoyable and gratifying for everyone involved.

One challenge that the dancers faced was to perform excerpts of the thesis while we were in the middle of the process. We presented work-in-progress versions of *Tuning the Space* in two shows, at Dixon Place and Triskelion Arts, New York City. These performance opportunities were crucial for the development and ripening of the piece once we received feedback from a different audience population, and the dancers experienced what *Tuning the Space* required from them as performers before the official premiere.

In this section of my thesis, I aim to meticulously describe and critically discuss the creative process of *Tuning the Space*. In chapter one, I reflect on the connection between my practices as a scholar and a choreographer. I argue that the academic research for *(Choreo)Tap Like a Girl: The relationship between tradition and innovation in tap dance choreography* influenced my choreographic and creative point of view of *Tuning the Space*.

In chapter two, I describe with details my process as a tap dance maker and self-assess through a critical lens my effectiveness in the choreographic approaches I proposed. By identifying my particular and traditional ways to see tap dance choreographies, I was able to determine the innovative strategies I used that pushed my boundaries and challenged myself as a tap choreographer.

CHAPTER I

Tuning The Theory

I define as the beginning of the creative process of *Tuning the Space* when I started to research and work on *(Choreo)Tap Like a Girl: The relationship between tradition and innovation in tap dance choreography*. The practice of reflecting about the dialogue between tradition and innovation in tap dance refined my choreographic eye and helped me to explore dance making out of my comfort zone. Furthermore, the critical investigation of tap history and its inherent gender and racial matters allowed me to become fully conscious of the privileges and challenges of being a white female young tap dancer from Brazil. By being aware of the similarities and differences among the female choreographers protagonists of tap history and myself as a dance maker, I recognized my creative potential to explore the choreographic possibilities and new perspectives within a form grounded in tradition.

As discussed in *(Choreo)Tap Like a Girl: The relationship between tradition and innovation in tap dance choreography*, tradition can mutate throughout time when blended with other aesthetics, in which can be innovative. Tap dance history is based on the cyclical dialogue between tradition and innovation, and it is a relevant characteristic that must be acknowledged during a creative process. By being conscious of the tradition-innovation relationship, I argue that to be innovative does not mean to be the first to explore certain movement. Rather, it is to explore the traditional traits of tap through a different

point of view. Moreover, it is to display a unique approach to choreography. I believe I accomplished this task of presenting my singular voice as a tap dance maker in *Tuning the Space*.

Similar to the study of the tradition-innovation relationship and tap history, the analysis of current ongoing female choreographers has also informed my creative process. Through the detailed choreographic investigations of the cutting-edge aesthetics developed by Chloe Arnold and Michelle Dorrance, I felt entirely connected with their ambitious and innovative points of view of tap choreography. In the process of writing *(Choreo)Tap Like a Girl: The relationship between tradition and innovation in tap dance choreography*, I found myself immersed in Arnold and Dorrance's compositional thinking, which inspired me to search for my own choreographic approach to tap dance within the inherent relationship between tradition and innovation.

I explored the dialogue between nostalgic and cutting-edge moments intrinsic to tap dancing mainly during the material building workshops. Often throughout tap history, dancers have self-choreographed solos and duets, which allowed them to develop their own particular style and aesthetic. To create and perform one's own steps and sequences is a traditional habit among tap dance choreographers. Therefore, my desire to promote dancers' self-expression and artistic voice aligned with this tradition of tappers, which is to create their choreographies and locate their own perspectives within an ever-changing form.

Inspired by the avant-garde spirit of the Tap Renaissance female artists and their idea of bringing different styles of movement to tap, I explored the traditional self-choreographed habit in tap dance through a contemporary perspective. In the process of creating movement material for *Tuning the Space*, I proposed collaborative workshops with dancers. The first phase of building material was improvisation exercises. In a circle, each dancer had a set of counts to improvise focusing only on the steps and rhythmical nuances. Sometimes, the performer had total freedom to improvise within the steps but had to follow a set rhythm, such as *Happy Birthday* or the melody of a soundtrack from the piece. At other moments, they had no restrictions regarding musical phrasing, but had limited steps with which they could play. These exercises on spontaneous composition proved to be essential practices because they helped the dancers develop the improvisational skills that were needed later on in the creative process.

After an improvisational circle, I guided the dancers through improvisations with specific tasks that followed my vision for each section. Based on post-modern dance creative processes, I offered tasks that focused mostly on the exploration of rhythmical phrasing, spatial intent, and continuous versus sharp movements. After they explored the concept in play, dancers memorized their personal movement and rhythmic phrases and taught it to the rest of the cast. From that point forward, I started to put together the short phrases to make long

movement sequences, as well as create transitions between each combination and add new movement material.

By approaching the traditional self-choreographed aspect of tap dance guided by post-modern concepts, I amplified the dialogue between tradition and innovation present in *Tuning the Space*. Ultimately, the improvisational exercises I used in the process brought about a sense of collaboration among the dancers, and allowed their individual personalities to shine through. The sense of community located through working in this way was key for the development of the aesthetic of the piece.

Following the depolarized and horizontal perspective in which I analyzed tradition and innovation, I established as a compositional goal to oppose the hierarchal relationship between rhythm and movement in tap dance. I often see tap choreographies that prioritize the rhythmical elements over quality of movement and exploration of space. My main goal during this process was to create a tap piece that didn't reaffirm the idea that tap dance is only focused on the movement of feet. Rather, I wanted to pull in the audience's attention to the wheeling arms, mobile torso, and spatial intention.

In order to achieve the quality of movement I was aiming for, especially in the torso and arms, I had to coach my dancers using different approaches. One strategy was to emphasize the different options dancers had regarding the way their upper-body movements related to the sounds produced by their feet. This relationship could be a response to the sound, a reverberation from the movement

of feet, an opposition of the shape of legs, or a support for an acrobatic and flashy step. I opted for this approach because it allowed the dancers to have their own interpretations and upper-body movement additions for each footwork phrase. For most of the time, the shapes and movements of torso and arms were improvisations and personal explorations, which supported dancers to focus on the specificity of the movement quality in play. For each section in the piece, I used imageries that stimulated the dancers' imagination. For example, I asked dancers to "move as if they are in water" or "move as fast as a ticking of a clock" in order to set the definitive quality of movement.

Another strategy I used to achieve a specific quality of movement was to explore phrases with shoes off. Once the process started, I noticed the struggle my dancers were experiencing in order to perform rhythmic intricacies at the same time they explore full-body fluidity and softness. With shoes off, they were able to disregard the rhythms for a while and discover the possible textures of upper-body movements. By prioritizing the sensations instead of shapes, dancers started to move with awareness of space, weight, time and flow. Therefore, each dancer found their personal body dynamics within the rhythmic phrases.

I recognize the tradition-innovation relationship in this balance between complex footwork and sensitive torso and arms. To generate elaborate and syncopated rhythms while creating different textures with upper-body is extremely challenging due to the traditional approach to arms and torso movements inherent to tap dance technique. As tap dancers, we are taught to focus

primarily on our feet and music. Consequently, the movement and intention of the upper-body is left aside in the learning and choreographic processes of most tap dance artists. Thus, my decision to equally focus on the rhythmic footwork and the texture of full-body illustrates one of the choreographic possibilities that the choreographers from Tap Renaissance have cultivated.

CHAPTER II

Finely Tuned Process

I remember feeling so inspired after writing and researching about the avant-garde choreographers that I instinctively started to search for sounds that would possibly be part of my piece. For most of my works, to choose music has always been my first step. Even though I wanted to challenge and push myself to try new choreographic approaches, I trusted my impulse to listen to music before anything. My method for musical search was to focus on sounds that sparked some movements and rhythms in my head. If I could hear the tap shoes sounds complementing the music, then that music was selected to my playlist with possible soundtracks.

I didn't have any difficulties at this first step of the process. I decided to focus my search on the repertory of a French music composer, René Aubry. I've used his compositions in past choreographies, and I knew his aesthetic would easily help me envision movements, rhythms, and moods. Then, I listen to Aubry's entire repertory and selected ten pieces of music with which I felt connected. From that playlist, some sounds were thrown away and others added, but the musical base of *Tuning the Space* was built during the very first search.

Two of my music choices were from previous choreographies, a self-choreographed solo that I created in 2013, *Bravo Se o Tempo Parasse*, and a group choreography I built with the exact same cast I had for this project, *Creatures of Habit*, which was performed in 2017. The decision to re-work old

choreographies was because I identified these two pieces as being part of the same world, where movement and sound were intrinsically connected. I realized I'm interested on how the quality of movement influences the sound of the shoes, and vice-versa. However, I wanted to explore this relationship further by approaching tap choreography through a different lens than the one I had when I first choreographed these two pieces.

I recognize my creative process as a balance between analytical thinking and intuitive drive. The way I decided on the soundtrack of *Tuning the Space* is an example of a strong intuitive moment in my creative process, and working on impulse was not limited to the musical choice. A lot of movement material was built by using dancers' improvisations and my own explorations. Yet, my strong intuitive drive is fully active when I have to make a choreographic decision in the moment, in particular when it is regarding order of movement phrases or rhythmical composition. I'm not sure how I make each choice, but I believe it is by assessing the material based on my aesthetical taste. If I enjoyed how two phrases sounded and looked together, that is enough for me to set that order.

With a similar approach to avoid overthinking during the process of linking each movement sequence, I also enjoy playing with chance and luck. Specifically, in the first section of *Tuning the Space*, I built the trio score based on pieces of paper that dancers picked with their eyes closed. On each piece of paper, I wrote the dancer's names and actions, like go, stop, continue, retrograde, reset,

fast forward. Then, the order of events was fully based on this chance game that decided who, when and what task was performed.

On the other hand, I have a resilient analytical thinking present in my creative process. I have moments of mathematical and precise creation where I use drawings, charts, and colorful descriptions of the movement phrases. I know exactly what, how, and when, I want something to happen. Besides helping me to plan and organize rehearsals, the visual aspect helps me to envision the specificities of the choreographies. Most of my analytical moments during the process of *Tuning the Space* focused on the spatial concept and intent of each section.

I have been always inclined to play with space as a dance maker. For *Tuning the Space*, I wanted to amplify my explorations, so I used visual cues to help me expand the way I used the space. I made drawings of the theater floor with lines and arrows that described the pathways that would predominate in each section. With different and specific ideas for exploration of space, I was also able to define my patterns and develop the spatial narrative of the piece. It was evident the predominance of linear and perpendicular pathways. When combined with asymmetrical and odd formations, the choreographic narrative became unexpected, which added an element of surprise. I'm interested in allowing the audience to understand the spatial and choreographic logic I'm presenting on stage, and suddenly changing my own rules and directions in the piece towards the goal of surprising the audience's eyes.

In a system of trial and error, I constructed the order of the sections based on the relation between the soundtracks. I envisioned *Tuning the Space* building an arc of energy from starting small, soft, silent, and slow towards upbeat, expansive, powerful, and noisy. Thus, the gradual shift was very connected with the atmosphere produced by the sound in combination with tap rhythms. It took me time to set an order that I felt had logic inside the choreographic narrative. There were a lot of attempts, assessments, failures, and re-attempts until I felt the piece had a beginning, middle and ending.

During the process of figuring out the order of *Tuning the Space*, I realized the piece needed a section to build smoothly the arc of energy I envisioned. It was when I decided to include myself in the cast, which was half way through the process. The movement aesthetic explored in *Tuning the Space* was born in my own investigations as a performer: how could I bring together my experiences in the tap dance and post-modern communities in which I'm currently part of. Based on the constant tradition-innovation relationship that I challenge myself to be in, I started to work on a solo in parallel to the creative process of *Tuning the Space*. At the first moment, I had no intention to merge both projects. However, I was so immersed in the thesis world that it didn't make sense to work on these choreographies separately. Moreover, the thesis needed exactly the type of piece my solo was in order to easily transition between the soft, silent, and slow beginning to the upbeat, expansive, and powerful ending.

Considering my goal to push my boundaries as a tap maker, there were some concepts I wanted to investigate since the very beginning of the creative process, such as close proximity, contact between dancers, low level, slides, and silence. These choreographic proposals were mostly explored in the guided improvisations during the building material workshops, as well as embedded in the phrase material that I choreographed for the cast. Later in the process, I also became interested in moments with no sounds versus noisy and chaotic movements.

My first choreographic proposal was to explore how the absence of space between dancers influenced their approach to movement and rhythm. It was very challenging to work on this idea because, similarly to the quality of movement, it is difficult to break certain habits that tap dancers have. We tend to be individualists concerning personal space, which makes us respect and not interfere in each other's kinesphere.

In many rehearsals, as soon I asked the dancers to stay closer to each other, many issues came across, like stepping on other's feet or not having enough space to move. They were so afraid with the possibility of hurting someone that they were unable to use their senses to avoid accidents. Due to this fear and anxiety, the dancers gradually spread out and increased the space between them. Analyzing it now, I recognize the idea of tap dancing in physical contact to another body needed more time and exploration than what I had for thesis. I

believe *Tuning the Space* was the beginning of a deeper research of close proximity and contact that I can develop later.

The exploration of low level, which means to approximate body's center of gravity to the floor, is a concept that challenges one of the most fundamental characteristics of tap dance due to the essence of its technique. The standing position is predominant in tap because it offers broader possibilities to practice the connection between feet and floor. The West African' influence brought to tap dance the angled torso and initiation from the hips, which promotes a relationship among pelvis, feet, and floor. The weight shifts and movements of the pelvis impact the shape and dynamics of the feet touching the floor and consequently, they affect the sound produced.

When a tap dancer is in the low level, the vertical relationship of the hips, feet, and ground changes. This switch diminishes the power of the touch of the foot because the weight of pelvis is not right above the feet, but parallel to it. Thus, my challenge was to explore the low level without abdicating the rhythms and musicality produced by the feet. I recognized the investigation of tap dance in the low level needs more time and research than the process of *Tuning the Space* allowed. Similarly to the study of contact and close proximity in tap, I believe this concept deserves an exhaustive exploration, which I hope to do in the future.

Analyzing from an outside point of view, it is evident the use of repetition in *Tuning the Space*. Among certain steps and movement phrases, the slide technique turned out to happen at different moments throughout the piece. In tap

dance, slide is the technical term used to define a controlled glide in which the tapper can travel through space or be stationary. It is a traditional step immortalized by Jimmy ‘Slyde’ Godbolt that has an enormous visual appeal because it prioritizes style over rhythm.

I followed my instinct to explore the choreographic potential of slides because I appreciate its risky execution and the freedom to play with different shapes, spatial intent, and speed. The exploration of the possibilities within the slide technique added a soft texture and bold attitude to the phrases. Due to the repetition and the variation of the quality of movement, the slide became an important motif of *Tuning the Space*.

Additionally, the slide technique was key for the exploration of a challenging choreographic proposal, the use of silence, hushed and muffled sounds. To produce clear rhythms with the feet is the most fundamental and traditional characteristic of tap; it is what defines this form of dance. Then, it was an enormous challenge to play with pauses and textured sounds without entirely ignoring the most basic and important facet of tap tradition, the bright metallic notes. However, with focus on the investigation of slide technique, I supported the silent moments and faint sounds because the dancers weren’t producing rhythms or tunes, but scratch noises from the actions of gliding and dragging their feet on the floor. Thus, my definition of “silence” in *Tuning the Space* is when there is no conventional sound produced by the feet such as the metallic notes, but subtle, textured, and muted sounds.

In order to find the balance between the investigation of silence and the importance of rhythm, I had to carefully be aware of the length and placement of the muted moments. It was never my intention to choreograph a tap dance piece where the performers didn't execute tap dance steps. Exactly the opposite, I wanted to celebrate and promote this American art form and honor its history, tradition, and rhythms.

However, silence is a relevant component of music and rhythmic phrases, because without the juxtaposition between sound and pause, there is no rhythm, just a one constant long note. Therefore, I believe the moments of silent tap shoes in *Tuning the Space* enhanced and highlighted the sections with intricate rhythms. Yet, my proposal to work with hushed tones didn't necessary mean the use of stillness. Through improvisational scores that focused on body parts other than feet, the dancers used the moments of silent and muffled shoes to explore textured movements in the upper-body, and exciting shapes of the legs, which were mostly informed by the variations of the slide technique.

Likewise the spatial concepts of close proximity and low level, I believe I can develop further the idea of complete silence in a tap dance piece. I recognize this choreographic proposal as an audacious idea that needs to be investigated more deeply. To push my boundaries as a tap dance maker requires bold ideas that can either succeed or fail. I understand I played safely in *Tuning the Space* regarding the use of subtle and muted sounds, but I'm also eager to take more risks and keep investigating the possibilities in which tap dance choreographies

can explore partnering work, low level, new approaches to traditional steps, and the absence of sounds.

CONCLUSION

My overall evaluation of *Tuning the Space* is very positive. I feel proud and satisfied with the piece I created in collaboration with excellent tap dancers and performers. I believe I was able to explore my creative potential at full, which resulted in personal discoveries of who I am as a dance maker and how I develop the aesthetic and choreographic narrative in a piece. The process of acknowledging the possibilities and different perspectives in which tap dance choreography can be expanded, helped me to think out of the box and proposed challenging ideas during this creative process.

The practice of reflecting about the cyclical process between tradition and innovation in tap dance refined my choreographic eye. Considering my eagerness to push my boundaries and take risks as a tap maker, I explored choreographic concepts based on bold and audacious ideas but without losing tap's roots. I investigated the possibilities in which tap dance choreographies can explore partnering work, low level, new approaches to traditional steps, and the absence of sounds. Thus, through the analytical thinking and the intuitive drive that guided my creative process, I investigated the choreographic possibilities and proposed new perspectives within a form grounded in tradition.

Ultimately, the desires and interests that the dancers showed in every rehearsal were key to overcome the choreographic doubts I had during the creative process. They unconditionally supported my ideas and accepted every challenge with open minds and hearts, which resulted in a process that was

enjoyable and gratifying for everyone involved. We were able to successfully foster a collaborative environment that allowed the performers and their individual personalities to shine through. The sense of community sustained by this group was crucial for the development of the soft, upbeat, expansive, and powerful aesthetic of *Tuning the Space*.

My focus to equally highlight rhythmic footwork and textured movement was challenging. By opposing the hierarchal and traditional relationship between rhythm and movement in tap dance, I offered a perspective that, to my mind, is innovative to the tap field because I explored it through my singular creative voice. In *Tuning the Space*, I stand for tap dance as a cutting-edge art form that is constantly promoting a dialogue between tradition and innovation. As part of the next generation of tap choreographers, I feel obligated to keep investigating and pushing the boundaries of the choreographic potentials that the avant-garde choreographers left as their legacies. Therefore, to cultivate tap as an exhaustive artistic process is an act of innovation, because it explores the range of possibilities in tap dance choreography.

I recognized in the title of the piece, *Tuning the Space*, a summary of the choreographic goals I achieved during the process. The balance I fostered between complex footwork and a movement sensitive body, added to the collaborative and improvisational process, exemplifies the tradition-innovation dialogue inherent to tap dance. Throughout the creative process of *Tuning the Space*, I promoted innovative approaches to traditional tap choreography aspects by establishing a

collaborative process based on the investigation of movements that are sensitive and responsive to sound and space. Therefore, I'm proud that I was able to choreograph a piece that created tunes through the feet while sculpturing the space with full-body and textured movements.

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ⁱ Mark Knowles, on page 6 of *Tap Roots*, explains the origin of cutting contest: "The term "cutting" in dancing denoted competition, or perhaps breaking away from the group and "showing your stuff" or "making your motion," which meant to improvise."

ⁱⁱ Mark Knowles, on page 216 of *The Tap Dance Dictionary* defines time-step as "an eight-measure movement traditionally placed at the beginning of a routine which had a readily recognizable and clearly defined rhythm."

ⁱⁱⁱ Constance Hill, on page 277 of *Dancing America*, describes Hines' term Improvography: "Like a jazz musician who ornaments a melody with improvisation riffs, Hines improvised within the frame of dance. His "improvography" demanded the percussive phrasing of a composer, the rhythms of a drummer, and the lines of a dancer."

^{iv} Mark Knowles, on page 39 of *Tap Roots*, explains that drumming was banned to prevent uprisings, and "African slaves were deprived of their traditional means of communication. Denied their most prevalent, and indeed sacred means of expression, the slaves substituted the forbidden drums with bone clappers, tambourines, and most importantly, hand and body slaps, and foot beats. The most primitive of all instruments, the human body, became the main source of rhythm and communication."

^v Constance Hill, on page 4 of *Tap Dancing America*, emphasizes that "women in tap's history have largely gone unnamed – often as chorus girl, partner to, and Queen of."

^{vi} Jeni Mcray describes the second-wave feminism as "the first movement to address the role of women in the workplace, the fight for equal pay, and the need for women to have equal access to leadership roles as men do, a fight that continues in the 21st century."

^{vii} Mark Knowles, on page 93 of *The Tap Dance Dictionary*, defines flash steps as "acrobatic and exciting dance movements. These were often used to finish a dance number."

^{viii} Constance Hill, on page 3 of *Tap Dancing America*, describes tap challenges as "any competition, contest, breakdown, or showdown in which tap dancers compete against each other before an audience of spectators or judges."

^{ix} Flash steps such as Pendulum Wing, a wing in which the free foot executes forward and backward brushes, and Over The Top, a leap over the leg.

^x Rhythm Turn is when legs are crossed and through toe-drops and heels a turn happens.

^{xi} Pullback Shuffles is a shuffle followed by a pullback change

^{xii} Paddle is a combination of heel dig followed by a brush backwards, step, and heel drop.

^{xiii} Mark Knowles, on page 183 of *The Tap Dance Dictionary* defines shuffle as "a brush forward in which the ball of the foot strikes the floor, followed by a brush backwards in which the ball of the foot strikes again the floor."

^{xiv} Here I'm referencing contemporary dance as a pluralistic aesthetic in which is happening today, now.