

Camille A. Brown

BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play

Reference and
Resource Guide





Camille A. Brown's *BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play* draws from dance, music, and hand game traditions of West and Sub-Saharan African cultures, as filtered through generations of the African-American experience. The result is a depiction of the complexities in carving out a positive identity as a black female in today's urban America. The core of this multimedia work is a unique blend of body percussion, rhythmic play, gesture, and self-expression that creates its own lexicon.

The etymology of her linguistic play can be traced from pattin' Juba, buck and wing, social dances and other percussive corollaries of the African drum found on this side of the Atlantic, all the way to jumping double dutch, and dancing The Dougie. Brown uses the rhythmic play of this African-American dance vernacular as the black woman's domain to evoke childhood memories of self-discovery.

Hambone, hambone, where you been? Around the world and back again

Let's use the hambone lyric as a metaphor for what happened culturally to song and dance forms developed in African-American enclaves during the antebellum era. The hambone salvaged from the big house meal made its way to cabins and quarters of enslaved Africans, depositing and transporting flavors from soup pot to soup pot, family to family, generation to generation, and providing nourishment for the soul and for the struggle. When dancing and drumming were progressively banned during the 18th century, black people used their creativity and inventiveness to employ their bodies as a beatbox for song and dance. In the Americas, this music helped them connect with their homeland and keep cultural traditions alive. It was termed "patting Juba".

Juba contained features that persist in African-American dances, notably improvisation, shuffle steps, supple body movements, and sharp rhythms. Skill and dexterity ruled the day in performing and developing artisans in this new genre. “Patting Juba” means slapping the hands, legs, and body to produce complex, rapid rhythms. The dance has survived the plantations and social dance circles and made its way onto the platforms of dance halls and palaces. These movement elements served as the phonemes of a dance vocabulary that persists over two centuries later.

[Read more about Josephine Baker](#)



By 1845, William Henry Lane, a free black man born in Rhode Island, had become most prolific in Juba and gained unimaginable national and international recognition as a master of the form. Often billed as “Master Juba”, he danced an amalgam of the jig, Juba, clog, buck, long dog scratch and wing dances, taking this African-American dance “around the world and back again”.

The wobbly legs of buck dancing, the flighty limbs of the wing step and the staccato quick feet of the jig served as the morphemes for popular social dances throughout the 20th century. Metal scraps were nailed to shoe bottoms and morphed into the theatrical tap dance form we know today. One can draw a through-line from Juba to the Charleston and Black Bottom of the 1920’s to the Funky Chicken of the 1960’s, the Kid n Play of the 1980’s, and to the Bop and DLow Shuffle of 21st century. The vernacular of these early social dances began to spread from dirt floors to dance halls and beyond. In fact, a long-limbed street dancer turned chorus girl named Josephine Baker exported the dances to France and all around Europe achieving great notoriety.

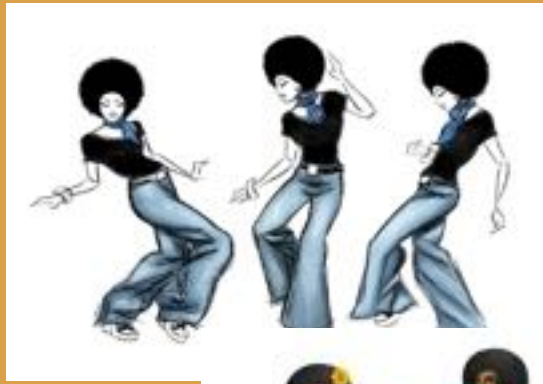
Social Dancing through the Decades



The Great Migration helped transport these social dances out of the South and into Northeast and Mid-western cities as blacks headed to industrial centers in search of jobs and new beginnings. Each region developed idiosyncratic constructs of popular dances of the day. New York City was the cauldron of creativity and Harlem was its flame. The Savoy Ballroom in Harlem billed itself as the “Home of Happy Feet”.

It was there that a new migration occurred; whites headed uptown to be entertained and dance to the big band orchestras of Chick Webb and Benny Goodman side by side with African-Americans. Dancers extraordinaire Norma Miller, Frankie Manning and “Shorty George” Snowden incorporated the syncopation of tap and the improvisation of jazz into the Lindy Hop and jitterbug steps that developed in tandem with the explosion of artistic expression of the Harlem Renaissance.

Learn more about [Norma Miller](#) and [Frankie Manning](#)



Social dance during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements started to prominently reflect the times. Dances with African names like the Watusi and the Boogaloo mirrored and proclaimed the African pride and heritage of American blacks. The frenetic and frenzied dances of the 60's including The Jerk, The Twist and The Monkey paralleled the social and political turmoil the United States was experiencing.

Have you ever attended a family cookout/wedding/pool party/social event, where multiple generations were there? Grandpop and Nana, Aunt Denise and cousin Deion, you, your cousins - real and play-were just chillin' and a really good song played on the Victrola/radio/8-track player/boom box/MP3 player.



In an instant everyone is up on the dance floor, checking out each other's moves. It is a battle of old-school vs new-school terpsichorean feats/feet's, and the conversations go something like: "Look, those kids aren't doing anything new. Back in the day we called that move the (...)" and, "Oh wow, look at Nana and Grandpop trying to do the (...), I wonder where they learned that?" As the saying goes, sooner or later, everything old is new again.

These days a quick tutorial on the foot patterns of the Funky Chicken or the ankle alignment of the Mashed Potatoes can be found on YouTube. The video-sharing website now supplements and supplants the social forums that African-Americans traditionally used to create and learn dances. Anyone can view, teach and try any dance from any decade with just a few clicks of a mouse. Watch "Soul Brother #1", James Brown, break down the hippest dances of the 1970's. And if you think Michael Jackson invented the moonwalk, YouTube shows you all the entertainers who did that slick backwards glide decades before the King of Pop.

Dance Tutorials

Are you a Stepper or a Schlepper? Take the Dance Quiz and find out!

Match the movie in column A to the popular social dance it inspired/reflected in column B.

A: MOVIE

B: SOCIAL DANCE

House Party

The Running Man

School Daze

Cheerleading

Breakin'

Popping/Locking

Beat Street

Kid n Play

The Running Man

Step Dancing

Drumline

Breakdancing

Choose from the options above to fill in the blanks:

1. Don Cornelius was the originator and host of the television dance show _____.
2. The _____ was the name of a funny-looking baby doll and a fun social dance of the 80's.
3. Beyonce performs J-setting in the music video _____.
4. The dawning of the computer-age sparked people to dance like a _____ or automaton.
5. Which of these is not the name of a popular social dance: turkey trot, bunny hop, komodo krump?
6. Circle the dance not named for a real person. Shorty George, Lindy Hop, Donna Dip, Dougie.

12 correct = High stepper! 11-9 correct=Pepper stepper! 8-5 correct =Tepid stepper 4-0 correct = Schlepper

Looking Back, Jumping Ahead, and Stepping Forward

In addition to popular dance, another form of linguistic play influenced the rhythmical education of the urban black girl. Two friends, a long clothesline, telephone cable, or jump rope were all that was needed for the fun pastime of double dutch. You have to pound the pavement for hours, and in many cases years, to earn your stripes in the playground or city sidewalks. Listen to the click-clack of the ropes, absorb the rhythm into your body, time the loop and swoop, and jump in! Rope jumpers sprinkle hand games, chants, and acrobatics into the milliseconds between the beat and devote vast amounts of time perfecting routines alone or with a partner. Black girls start sharpening their corporeal coordination at an early age and begin to incorporate complex steps, patterns, and speed into the aerobic game-sport-dance as they advance.



Michelle Obama honed her skills on the streets of Chicago and demonstrated her jumping prowess on national TV and in China. Double dutch contests and competitions are now found worldwide and are featured on ESPN2. Each December Harlem's Apollo Theater hosts an international showdown (Japan has amazing contenders), and in 2008, New York City public schools began offering double dutch as a varsity league activity – proving very popular with predominantly African-American high schools. Movies like Doubletime and Jump In! spotlight the focus and determination required for competition-level jumping, and the pride (and bragging rights) that accompany the fun.



The animated and vibrant “step” dances performed by sororities and fraternities are superb examples of the body linguistics Camille A. Brown plays with in her work. The percussive, stylized, and coordinated group dances that feature chants and shouts, brings together African song and dance traditions mixed with ring shouts, Juba, military precision, Motown, and modern greek culture. By the 1970’s, “stepping” gained popularity due to widespread demonstrations on college campuses.



Today, film also provides windows into the African-American dance traditions found in the Black Greek-Lettered Organizations established at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Spike Lee's *School Daze*, and Sylvain White's *Stomp the Yard*, are two films that helped expand the influence and popularity of the form. Stepping is no longer just a "greek thing", it has transcended race and can be found outside the African-American fraternal community. Missy Elliott was one of the first

BLACK GIRL: Linguistic Play, embodies all of these movement languages that have been rooted in African-American culture and tradition. What influences have shaped your own linguistic play? Let's talk about it with Camille A. Brown & Dancers.

Resources and References

•To Read

Bambara, Toni Cade. *The Black Woman: An Anthology*.

Atkin, Cholly, and Jacqui Malone. *Class Act: The Jazz Life of Choreographer Cholly Atkins*.

Cox, Aimee Meredith. *Shapeshifters: Black Girls and the Choreography of Citizenship*.

Emery, Lynee Farley. *Black Dance in the United States from 1619 to 1970*.

Gaunt, Kyra D. *The Games Black Girls Play*.

Haskins, Jim. *Black Dance in America*.

Kimbrough, Walter. *Black Greek 101*.

Malone, Jacqui. *Steppin on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance*.

Marks, Carol and Diana Edkins. *The Power of Pride: Stylemakers and Rulebreakers of the Harlem Renaissance*.

Miller, Norma and Evette Jensen. *Swingin at the Savoy*.

Mock, Janet. *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love...*

Thompson, Robert Farris. *Aesthetic of the Cool: Afro-Atlantic Art and Music*.

Watson, Steven. *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930*.

•Movies and Documentaries

Bring it On. Directed by Peyton Reed. 2000.

Frankie Manning: Never Stop Swinging. Directed by Julie Cohen.

House Party. Directed by Reginald Hudlin. 1990.

Let's Get the Rhythm: The Life and Times of Miss Mary Mack. Directed by Irene Chagall. 2014.

School Daze. Directed by Spike Lee. 1988.

Steppin: The Movie. Directed by Michael Talliferro. 2009.

The Human Hambone. Directed by Mark Morgan. 2005.

•References

Wikipedia: African American Dance, Juba, Master Juba

Encyclopædia Britannica: Juba

Free to Dance. Timeline <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/freetodance/timeline/timeline2.html>

Dr. Crystal deGregory writes on Step history in HBCU's. <https://hbcustory.wordpress.com/2015/05/22/this-is-why-we-step-a-history-of-stepping-in-black-greek-lettered-life-culture/>

•Internet Resources

Archives of Early Lindy Hop <http://www.savoystyle.com/>

Jitterbuzz.com: What is Lindy Hop? <http://www.jitterbuzz.com/lindyhop.html>

Frankie Manning Foundation <http://www.frankiemanningfoundation.org>

Mixed Pickles' Vintage Dance Timeline: Jazz Age Dance <http://www.mixedpickles.org/jazzdance.html>

PBS: Jazz, A Film by Ken Burns <http://www.pbs.org/jazz/>

Streetswing.com <http://www.streetswing.com/>

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