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Jookin, Jiggin, Beatin Ya Feet and Gettin' Light:
African-American Footwork Traditions

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Professor Kristen Smiarowski
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Abstract

This paper looks specifically at Memphis jookin, New Orleans jiggin, Washington DC's beat ya feet and New York City's litedeet. It explores common characteristics and regional differences in each dance, connecting them to older African and African-American dance aesthetics.

Emphasizing shared cultural heritage, this paper argues that these dances form a singular body of work that is directly connected to African-American dance traditions developed during and after enslavement. In addition, it argues that these dances are important cultural institutions and act to preserve specific African-American socio-cultural practices.

African-American social dance is a well-studied cultural phenomenon. A group of dances created by African-Americans over the course of their four-hundred-year existence in the United States, these dances are both deeply connected to African culture and hugely influential to American culture. Most well-known among these dances are the older styles that eventually became jazz dance—dances like the lindy-hop, the cakewalk and others. A less-studied group are the modern social dances: the dances that have developed in the last thirty years. Nearly every region with an established African-American community has a unique dance style, but this paper will look most in depth at Memphis jookin, DC’s beat ya feet, Louisiana or New Orleans jiggin’ and New York City’s litedeet. These dances are often hyper-regional and unique to the traditions of these areas, but they also share many of the same cultural characteristics. This paper argues that despite the regional differences, overarching themes like the importance of footwork, mastery of polyrhythms, and community involvement indicate that these regional social dances are all part of one shared cultural lineage. As such, these dances both legitimize African-American and Black culture in the United States and act as living museums of African-American traditions.

The dances mentioned above, like all African-American dances, are rooted in the dance traditions of enslaved Africans brought to the United States between 1619 and 1860. The oldest of these was the ring shout—a circle dance done in West Africa. Speaking on the dances of people in Southern Africa in 1763, Robert Farris Thompson stated that “the men dance with knees bent and bodies carried with little motion, leaning forward. The steps are very precise. They are minute in size...but they are strongly stamped...”¹ This description can also be applied to the form of ring shouters. The ring shout was performed in a circle, with dancers circling counter-clockwise, shuffling to the beat of the music. The singers typically sat off to one side and

kept rhythm with a wooden stick. Songs were performed in a call-and-response style and dancers also clapped to the beat. The ring shout decreased in popularity beginning in the early 20th century and is not practiced today outside of the Gullah-Geechee communities, but its legacy lives on in various forms of regional African-American dance.

During the period of enslavement, African-Americans incorporated these older styles into new social dances that were reflective of their experiences in America. During this era, and the subsequent Jim Crow era, African and African-American traditions were heavily suppressed. White slaveholders actively sought ways to destroy African identity and culture in order to reduce the possibility of revolt and escape and to reinforce the racial hierarchy that they were creating.² As a result, Black people found creative ways to keep African culture alive and express themselves, fostering a new African-American culture. Dance became one of these mediums—many of the aesthetic forms of African dance can be found in various African-American dance forms throughout history. As Deidre Sklar says in her article “Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance,” “movement must be considered as an *embodiment* of cultural knowledge, a kinesthetic equivalent, to using a local language.”³ Within the Black community, the continued reappearance of older African and African-American aesthetics in newer styles indicates both a consistent cultural lineage and dance’s ability to preserve culture.

The oldest of the regional dances discussed in this paper is Memphis jookin’, a dance style characterized by smooth and precise footwork. Sometimes referred to as ‘street ballet,’ Memphis jookin’ originated in Memphis’ hip-hop scene in the 1990s.⁴ Derived from an older style called gangsta-walking, jookin’ involves a combination of stepping footwork and gliding.⁵ Dancers slide their feet across the ground, swiveling at the ankles, knees and hips. Turns and half-rotations on the toes are commonplace in this style, and dancers often suspend their turns for

as long as possible.⁶ The movements of both the legs and the upper-body are smooth and angular, with a light, almost mechanical quality. Importantly, jookin' involves significant isolation of the upper-body from the lower-body. Dancers initiate directional changes with the lower body, and the upper body lags behind, moving sequentially through the spine, as opposed to turning all at once. Depending on the dancer's preference and whether they are dancing an older style or not, the arms are included through more traditional hip-hop choreography.⁷ Jookin' is also a dance style seemingly heavily influenced by sneaker culture—dancers use a specific footwork technique that involves only minimal creasing along the metatarsal. It gives the appearances of a shoe sole that remains mostly flat, even when dancers are dancing on their toes.⁸ Most notably, the feet in jookin' are not primarily percussive—while the dancer is always on beat, unlike in other forms, the feet are not keeping that beat through stamping.

In contrast to the tight movements of Memphis jookin', Louisiana or New Orleans jiggin' is characterized by high energy and high-flying legs. Jiggin' is a style of dance that originates out of Black Louisianian party culture and is closely linked to bounce music, a style of New Orleans club music. The name comes from a late 1990s or early 2000s' slang term for taking ecstasy but has since come to refer to a specific kind of high energy dance.⁹ Jiggin' is characterized by fast and heavy footwork and high legs. The knees butterfly in and out, while the feet keep time to the heavy beats typical in bounce music. Dancers often look as though they are running in place and punctuate their movements with outwards stamps, criss-cross turns and outward jumps.¹⁰ The isolation and rotation of the chest from the lower body is also common in jiggin' and is often used as an impetus for turning the whole body, as opposed to the hips or feet. Importantly, the upper body stays mostly upright or at a slight tilt forward. Like other styles of African-American dance, the arms are not the most intricate part of jiggin'. Typically, they stay bent in the mid-

torso range, rebounding out laterally or vertically around the head, depending on the energy exerted by the dancer.¹¹ They are typically loose and do not exhibit the kind of control shown in the lower body, though they move with the same level of high energy. In jiggin, the upper half is circular and fluid, while the lower half remains angular. Jiggin' is a highly rhythmic dance—the movements of the feet, in particular, always land on the beat regardless of what the rest of the body is doing. It is not uncommon to see dancers moving their upper body or knees at a half-tempo or double-tempo, while their feet continue to hit the ground at regular speed.¹²

Stylistically, DC's beat ya feet looks like a cross between Louisiana jiggin', Memphis jookin' and praise-dance. Much of the uniqueness of beat ya feet comes directly from its connection to the DC go-go music scene. Go-go, a style of music created by Chuck Brown and in the Soul Searchers in DC in the 1970s, incorporates funk, gospel, jazz, and Afro-Caribbean beats.¹³ Beat ya feet was created by Marvin Taylor in the late 1990s in southeast DC, specifically to go-go music. Beat ya feet incorporates the high energy and bouncy movements of jiggin' with the intricate footwork of jookin'. Dancers use ankle isolations like those in jookin' and out-turned feet like that seen in jiggin', although it tends to be much faster.¹⁴ There are also references to Black dance forms like the two-step and breakdancing incorporated into beat ya feet.¹⁵ Beat ya feet has elements of other styles in it as well, most notably praise dance and Latin styles. The praise dance influences can be seen in the fast shuffling and pitched upper body, while the Latin influence can be seen in the almost salsa-like movements of the legs and arms.¹⁶ This is no doubt a direct connection to the gospel and Afro-Caribbean influences in go-go music. Beat ya feet also incorporates arm choreography, and it tends to oscillate between the reactive bouncing seen in other styles and actual choreography derived from breakdancing.¹⁷ Like jiggin', the feet in beat ya feet are percussive and step or stomp to keep the time.

Litefeet, (sometimes called Getting Light, Get Light, or Get Lite) developed in Harlem in the early 2000s, is the youngest of the mentioned dance styles.¹⁸ It is a direct descendant of hip-hop and breakdancing, though it takes influence from a number of regional styles, which is representative of New York's role as a hub for Black migration. Like the other styles mentioned, litefeet is a footwork dance, but it is unique because it is particularly fast and flashy.¹⁹ Stylistically, litefeet's movements are precise and controlled, but they are more aggressive and less fluid than what is seen in Memphis jookin'. Litefeet dancers utilize moves like shuffling, stomping, ankle rolls and jumps. They are also prone to touching the ground and incorporating basics of breakdancing.²⁰ Like hip hop, litefeet has a core body of named techniques that dancers build off of and improvise with—in litefeet, they are the tone wop, Aunt Jackie, bad one, Harlem shake and chicken noodle soup.²¹ In building off of these basics, dancers incorporate arm choreography, tricks, pole choreography and acrobatics, all of which sets litefeet apart from other forms.²² This is in part because litefeet developed as a subway performance art, so many of its most distinctive elements draw directly from that.²³ Like jookin and jiggin, litefeet is performed to hip hop music, although remixes are used more often than the original songs.

These regional dances share a few distinct markers that clearly show their shared heritage. Firstly, they are all footwork centered dances with fairly minimal arm choreography. This isn't to say that the arms are uninvolved or still—they are very much involved in the dancing, but they are primarily reactive, in the sense that they enhance the movements of the lower body as opposed to being the main focus. Even in styles that are more incorporative of the arms, the feet and lower body are still the center of the movement. In this way, they share a connection to older forms of Black social dance, especially those that are more closely connected to the ring shout, which was defined by precise, shuffling feet and tucked-in arms. This form is

present in various styles of Black dance, social and religious, American and African. As stated by Juretta Jordan Heckscher in her dissertation entitled, ““All the Mazes of the Dance”: Black Dancing, Culture, and Identity in the Greater Chesapeake World from the Early Eighteenth Century to the Civil War,” “...[W]ith crooked knees and bended bodies, they footed it nimbly, ’...that one phrase...captured what might be considered the classic stance of dancers throughout the Afro-Atlantic world...”²⁴ Each of the regional dances mentioned in this paper follow in this same tradition—though dancers may move away from this form depending on the complexity of movement, all of the basics return to this same position.

Secondly, they all rely heavily on an intrinsic understanding of the rhythm of the music that one is listening to—the best dancers are able to play with the beat without losing it and demonstrate this by moving at half- or double-time or deliberately skipping a beat to perform a specific movement. The ability to move polyrhythmically across body halves is also highly valued. These skills all indicate a high level of musicality. Being able to move across multiple tempos and rhythms means that the dancer is able to pick out the different rhythms in the music itself. As dancer Kevin “Noodlez” Davis says of beat ya feet and go-go music, “Go-go has a lot of different rhythms within the sound. You could dance to the rhythm of the rapper or you could dance to the rhythm of the keyboard.”²⁵ The same is true for New Orleans’ bounce music, Memphis rap or the hip-hop remixes used by litefeet dancers in New York. In addition to this, across all of the styles, the ability to combine complex and precise movement with more basic moves is deeply appreciated. Like the ability to pick out the different rhythms in the music, knowing when to add a complex move or emphasize a just-completed showstopper by slowing it down with a basic move indicates a certain level of mastery of style.

These regional dance styles also reveal cultural norms unique to African diasporic cultures. Most clearly, they are communal dances practices. Though these are mostly individual dances, they are almost always performed in a group setting with an audience. Typically, spectators stand in a circle or half-circle while dancers move between the roles of spectator and performer. These characteristics are present in many other forms of African and diaspora dances—dance is primarily a social activity in which the audience incorporates performers, spectators, teachers and students all at once. Juretta Jordan Heckscher identifies this spatial construction as one of the cultural items brought over during the slave trade. She quotes a European who watched African dancers in Sierra Leone in the 1700s: “Men and Women make a Ring in an open part of the Town, and one at a time shews his Skill in antick Motions and Gesticulations...”²⁶ The audience in these styles are also active participants even if they are not dancing—they keep the beat through clapping, they encourage the dancers and in styles with iconic music (like jiggin’ and beat ya feet), they shout out lyrics. These actions help to facilitate the dancing and emphasize the role of the community in the performance.

This involvement of the community has evolved into a form of community caretaking. While many of these dances are street dances and some of them come directly from gang culture, community-based street dancing has been used as a way of preventing young people from becoming involved in harmful activities. Organizations like the Street Wize Foundation in Washington DC organized beat ya feet sessions as part of their youth outreach programming, which sought to teach young people about health, education, and substance abuse, among other topics.²⁷ Likewise, hip-hop and dance cyphers have long been seen as a way to get young people off of the streets and into activities that are less harmful.²⁸

These dances also exhibit gender norms and expectations that are quite separate from white, Western normative ideas of dance. Many of these dances utilize hip and chest isolations in a way that could be marked as feminine outside of these contexts. Though not actually gender-specific dance forms, they are most commonly performed by men and in these contexts, the movements are not seen as feminine. Hip and chest isolations and undulations are extremely common across genders in African dance styles. The incorporation of these movements into typically masculine dance forms shows that African-American and African diasporic constructions of masculinity differ from white, Western norms. In addition, their inclusion in African-American dance indicates that this is a cultural norm that has been passed down from the early days of Black dance in the US.²⁹

When looked at together, regional African-American social dances embody many tenets of African-American culture and history. Each uniquely influenced by the Black populations of their respective cities, these dances carry on older African and African-American dance aesthetics, like polyrhythms, both in music and in dance, and complex footwork. In addition, they highlight the importance of community to Black culture and the differences in gendered expectations within Black dance. Ultimately, they form a body work with a clear connection to early African-American traditions, indicating a shared cultural lineage in spite of the regional differences.

Notes

- ¹ Art Rosenbaum, Margo Newmark Rosenbaum, Johann S. Buis, and McIntosh County Shouters, “‘Kneebone in the Wilderness’: The History of the Shout in America” in *Shout Because You’re Free: The African American Ring Shout Tradition in Coastal Georgia*, (University of Georgia Press, 1998), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46nn8t.6>, 19.
- ² Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007, 36-52.
- ³ Deidre Sklar, “Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance,” in *Moving History / Dancing Cultures: A Dance History Reader* ed. Ann Dils, and Ann Cooper Albright (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 30
- ⁴ “A Memphis dance style is taking the world by storm, once toe stall, slide and ankle break at a time,” ABC 24, 8.04 CDT November 4, 2021, Entertainment, <https://www.localmemphis.com/article/entertainment/memphis-jookin-dance-style/522-6279e97e-d4f8-44af-8ec1-ee180732ebf0>; “Jookin is a Style of music and Dance That Originated in Memphis at the Crystal Palace,” The Music Origins Project, <https://www.musicorigins.org/item/jookin-the-dance-music-style-originated-in-memphis-at-the-crystal-palace/>.
- ⁵ Douglas, “Memphis Gangsta Walk Mix,” YouTube Video, 4:44, May 28, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrpZdXjffNY>.
- ⁶ LILBUCKDALEGEND, “Memphis Jookin Legends Session,” YouTube Video, 5:39, November 16, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyqdiGfgIyU>.
- ⁷ Official Memphis Jookin, “Memphis Jookin Cypher Ep 5 (Gangsta walk edition),” YouTube Video, 10:20, March 2, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KhZU2v9NsVs>.
- ⁸ Official Memphis Jookin, “Memphis Jookin Cypher Ep 5;” Douglas, “Memphis Gangsta Walk Mix.”
- ⁹ Donney Rose, “This One’s for the Jiggalators...Jig Origins,” *Observations in Blackness: A Literary Offering by Donney Rose* (blog), June 8, 2021, <https://donneyrose.info/writings/f/this-ones-for-the-jiggalatorsjig-origins>.
- ¹⁰ Couch Potateaux, “SU Homecoming Jiggfest ft Danrue, Tweeday & GeezyAllStar,” YouTube Video, 4:27, December 10, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KbBDPVJQbaM>.
- ¹¹ LSU Tiger TV, “LSU Jigg/Stroll Session ‘Uncut’ 8/24/16,” YouTube Video, 2:16, August 25, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILzD-AjnOOM>.
- ¹² Jigglikerob, “Jigglikerobb and Jwheat jiggin for Boosie #louisiana,” YouTube Video, 3:14, June 7, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s8T1WbORBC8>.
- ¹³ Charlotte Buchen Khadra, “Don’t Mute DC: How Go-Go Music Inspires the Beat Ya Feet Movement,” KQED, May 5, 2020, <https://www.kqed.org/arts/13879679/dont-mute-dc-how-go-go-music-inspires-the-beat-ya-feet-dance-movement>.
- ¹⁴ Jose Hancock, “Beat ya feet respond back to Justin Timberlake,” YouTube Video, 4:11, June 28, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2FCi2WOjJPU>.
- ¹⁵ JLBROWNEYES, “Crazylegz & Beat Ya Feet Finest DC Workshop 9-22-19,” YouTube Video, 3:46, September 27, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCC13uRz8LM>.
- ¹⁶ Kioni Shropshire-Maina, “The Praise Break,” (essay, Loyola Marymount University), 2.
- ¹⁷ JLBROWNEYES, “Crazylegz & Beat Ya Feet Finest DC Workshop 9-22-19;” bobbydivine, “Brandon aka ‘Locks’ beat ya feet battle 3/11,” YouTube Video, 2:53, March 31, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0W7aj2ubZw>.
- ¹⁸ Lauren Schwartzberg, “The Rise of Litefeet: How the Dance Genre Moved from Subway to Mainstream,” *Vulture*, September 7, 2015, <https://www.vulture.com/2015/09/how-litefeet-moved-from-subway-to-mainstream.html>.
- ¹⁹ King Bronx, “Get Lite: Fordham Plaza,” YouTube Video, 4:13, October 26, 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XTY0CCX_ePA.
- ²⁰ Crackillz168, “Harlem Shake ‘GET LITE’ nyc,” YouTube Video, 2:55, July 10, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6b69UKxkeWc>; ShotbyMo “Litefeet Nation Union square Cypher,” YouTube Video, 12:23, September 17, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v_OtKGhQtxE.
- ²¹ Litefeet Up!, “Litefeet History (brief summary),” YouTube Video, 26:33, September 2, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJMXf5gg0wA>.
- ²² Schwartzberg, “The Rise of Litefeet.”
- ²³ Tommaso Sacconi, “Litefeet/ L Train NYC,” YouTube Video, 2:11, July 28, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cep7DITTR60>.
- ²⁴ Jurretta Jordan Heckscher, “‘All the Mazes of the Dance’: Black Dancing, Culture, and Identity in the Greater Chesapeake World from the Early Eighteenth Century to the Civil War,” Order No. 9969819, The George

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²⁵ Buchen Khadra, “Don’t Mute DC.”

²⁶ Heckscher, “All the Mazes of the Dance,” 37-8.

²⁷ @StreetwizefoundationSWF “Street Wize Foundation (SWF),” Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/StreetwizefoundationSWF/>.

²⁸ *Wreckin’ Shop from Brooklyn*, Dian Martel, New York City: 1992, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUAuCQN-AJI>.

²⁹ Viktoria Taffermer-Gulyas, “Caribbean Traditions in Modern Choreographies: Articulation and Construction of Black Diaspora Identity in L’Ag’Ya by Katherin Dunham,” *Graduate Theses and Dissertations* (University of South Florida, 2014), <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/5137>, 33.

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