

Program Narrative: Archiving Black Vernacular Dance: Deborah Mitchell's *Moon Suite*

By: Kat Echevarria Richter

As a high school student, I had the honor of dancing in Deborah Mitchell's *Moon Suite*, choreographed for the New Jersey Tap Dance Ensemble and praised by dance historian Constance Valis Hill in *Tap Dancing America* (2010) for its "subtly and depth." In 2020—nearly two decades after I had left the Ensemble to pursue a BA in dance and history and an MA in dance anthropology— NJTap celebrated its 25th anniversary and Mitchell invited my company, the Philadelphia-based Lady Hoofers Tap Ensemble, to perform. As we took our places backstage alongside guest artists including Savion Glover, Mercedes Ellington, Tony Waag, Brenda Buffalino, and Germaine Goodson, I began to fully comprehend Mitchell's legacy. She created a racially integrated company, insisting that tap was an "original American art" form that could belong to everyone (even white girls like me), and she stewarded that company for over two and a half decades, despite tap's marginalized status in the dance world. My proposed research project utilizes archival, autoethnographic, oral history, and practice as research methodologies to explore strategies of resistance to white cultural hegemony through the choreography and staging of Black vernacular dance, specifically rhythm tap.

Due to its associations with blackface minstrelsy and popular entertainment, tap has often been deemed incapable of serious expression. And yet the form, with its Ring Shout antecedents, is inherently political as it renders the body a site of resistance. Many tap dancers refer to their craft as one of communication, and many historians date the origins of tap to the Stono Rebellion of 1739 and the subsequent ban on drums in South Carolina's so-called slave codes. Like jazz, tap can be viewed as American history writ large: democratic by nature in comparison to "elite" European art forms such as ballet and classical music; and born of improvisation—a characteristic that was true of the enslaved Africans, indentured servants, and immigrants who contributed to the form, and remains true of its syncopated rhythms to this day. In "'Being Savion Glover:' Black Masculinity, Translocation, and Tap Dance" (undated), Thomas DeFrantz draws on the work of Brenda Dixon-Gottschild to illustrate how, "Consistent with American social constructions that have historically displaced and invisibilized their African wellsprings, tap has been trivialized or infantilized as a vernacular form accessible to all but without the patina of profundity allowed art." My work as a tap dancer/practitioner, educator, choreographer, scholar, freelance writer, and artistic director of my own tap company aims to reclaim this profundity for tap.

I'm particularly interested in the historiography of tap, especially the denial and subsequent reassertion of tap's West African and African American roots through published and performative histories. I intend to conduct archival research at the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library. There, I will access oral history interviews with tap dancers Jeni LeGon, Mable Lee, Dianne Walker, Germaine Goodson, and especially Deborah Mitchell to further contextualize her work as a dancer, choreographer, and arts administrator. I will also analyze several Broadway musicals and films that were created around the same time that *Moon Suite* was choreographed and performed, many of which are only available at the NYPL. These include *Sophisticated Ladies* (1981), *Black and Blue* (1989), *Jelly's Last Jam* (1993), *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk* (1996), and *Play On!* (1997) and *Shuffle Along, or the Making of the Musical Sensation of 1921 and All That Followed* (2016). I was fortunate to see both *Noise/Funk* and *Shuffle Along* on Broadway, but only one time each (and without the benefit of extensive training in dance analysis and criticism in the case of the former, as I was in high school at the time). As such, I am eager to fully analyze both works, bringing to bear my extensive training in and knowledge of rhythm tap, in combination with conversations and interviews with colleagues who danced in the Broadway productions, to evaluate their significance in the development and revival of tap—both rhythm tap and Broadway tap— in the United States.

This archival research will augment my autoethnographic and kinesthetic research into Mitchell's critically-acclaimed *Moon Suite*, choreographed to waltz, bossa nova, and swing treatments of the jazz standard *How High the Moon* arranged by Leonard Oxley. As a tap dancer, I was fortunate to train under both Mitchell and Oxley from 1995-2003, first as a member of the Youth Ensemble and then as a Principal Dancer. As a light-skinned, white passing, third generation Puerto Rican, my time with the Ensemble was a transformative experience for me: one that introduced me to Black vernacular dance, to the world of Duke Ellington, and the legacies of systemic racism in the dance world. It has taken me several decades of academic scholarship and the implementation of antiracist pedagogy in my teaching to better understand the importance of allyship, advocacy, and documentation in my academic and artistic pursuits. This project will bring me back to my roots in tap and will continue to impact my work as a tap dance scholar and practitioner, as an educator, and as an administrator.

In October 2021, I will present the results of this proposed research at the annual meeting of the Dance Studies Association. This year's conference theme is "Galvanizing Dance Studies: Building Anti-Racist Praxis, Transformative Connections, and Movement(s) of Radical Care" and I will present my paper, "Deborah Mitchell's *Moon Suite*: an inquiry into the staging, embodiment, and archiving of black vernacular dance" as part of a panel entitled "Black Women Navigating the Avant Garde: 21st Century Innovations in Rhythm and Movement" along with my colleagues Molly S. Roy and Michael J. Love. I will also submit a revised version of the paper to be considered for inclusion in *Black Women's Dance History: Stars, Constellations, and Galaxies of Movement* a new anthology edited by Takiyah Amin and Stephanie Y. Evans, which will be published by an academic press in 2022.

This research will also inform my teaching at Stockton University and contribute to my continued professional development. It will also contribute to my writing as a freelancer for several non-academic publications including *Dance* and *Dance Teacher* magazines, and to both my choreography for and administration of The Lady Hoofers Tap Ensemble, specifically the mentorship we provide to pre-professional dancers from Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware through our Youth Ensemble. In these ways, I hope to begin to pay back the debt of gratitude that I owe to the Black women who so graciously embraced me and my early work in tap.