

## Dance the City

Maya Stovall (Wayne State U)

How might an anthropologist use dance to study cities? How about dance ethnography as method? The Liquor Store Theatre project (LST) is a series of choreographed dance performances and ethnographic conversations on the sidewalks and spaces in and around liquor stores on Detroit's east side. LST started in a moment where you feel tears begin to form: a solitarily emotional place of anguish, release, and sometimes joy. A moment of holding on and of letting go, where something indescribable but so incredibly recognizable is speeding to the surface, rushing at you full throttle, and all you can do is let go and let it happen, whatever it may be. It lands on the shale- and dust- coated sidewalks of the city, dancing to bizarre rhythms as it seeks to connect with people. LST sets forth choreography/ethnography as research method. It uses staged dance performances in the spaces of my neighborhood as the point where ethnographic conversations begin. In this way, creativity and improvisation are at the center of ethnographic encounters. Working in an east side neighborhood in Detroit, LST investigates the complexities of blackness in a small, unique zone of an American city in transition.



Liquor Store Theatre, Midtown, Detroit. August, 2015. Photo courtesy Eric Johnston

Dance anthropology's rich genealogy has historically focused on the ethnography of dance cultures (for example, Dunham 1969 [1936], Deren 1949, Kaeliinohomuku 1969, Kaepler 1985, Cowan 1990, Ness

1992, Browning 1995, Sklar 2001). As such, however, dance as ethnographic method and the theoretically promising *dance as lens* have been confined to a relatively narrow vein. When I refer to dance as ethnographic method, I refer to an approach where the ethnographer implicates his or her body in motion and somatic experiences as a point of entry to a close study. In dance ethnography approaches, the vulnerability, presence, improvisation, and creativity of the anthropologist's approach center ethnographic encounters from the start. What about dance as lens to study cities? Outside anthropology, ethnographers (Kwan 2013, Lemon 2013) have deployed dance as a broad category of action and interaction through which to closely explore their surroundings. LST uses dance as ethnographic method, knowing that cities *dance*. The choreographies of cities happen on sidewalks and streets, and urban theorists have written extensively on this in a well-established genealogy of literature ( see, for example, Jacobs 1961, Whyte 1980, Lefebvre 1991, 2004). The choreography of the city, of course, is closely linked to the right to the city (Newman 2015, Harvey 2008) which determines who has claims on particular spaces and places.

In Photo 1, LST explores the rapidly gentrifying Midtown zone, a neighborhood situated between the main north/south artery Woodward Avenue and the host of Wayne State University's campus. The liquor store in Photo 1 is on a block, however, that is not totally "gentrified". Residents from nearby low-income and senior housing still heavily populate this zone and many frequent this store. The residents pause and observe while we dance. The dancing invites residents to reverse the ethnographic gaze. The anthropologist is the spectacle; the anthropologist is the *other* who is observed. I feel vulnerable in these moments of being watched. I remind myself that this might be how our research participants feel when we question them, photograph them, watch them.



Liquor Store Theatre, Midtown, Detroit. August, 2015. Photo courtesy Eric Johnston

### **Shades of McDougall Hunt**

When I moved into this zone over three years ago, I was mystified by the beautiful melancholy, the bizarre poetics, the stories, the deep and broad African American cultural traditions, and the urban legends of the place. This place is poetic. It is charged with movement—cars endlessly stream up and down the major streets surrounding my bank turned studio/apartment. Bounded by major streets including Gratiot Avenue, Mt. Elliott, and Vernor Highway, in a post-industrial corridor just 2 miles from downtown Detroit proper, this little 0.385 square mile slice of Detroit's East Side is a fantastic, strange, culturally rich place painfully impacted by intersecting forces of failed capitalism and unresolved social inequity, and utterly pulsating with art, religion, newness, oldness, decay, tradition, innovation, realism, persistence, optimism. McDougall Hunt itself shakes and writhes with art and I'm convinced it spoke to me through its concrete and tall grass grip to start this project.



The author's studio/apartment in McDougall Hunt, Detroit, is a former Comerica bank. Photo Courtesy  
Maya Stovall

Overgrown nature and ruddy country foliage collide with the gritty post-industrial coldness of concrete, metal, and asphalt. Concrete and asphalt bust up and explode from years of Detroit's brutal frost-and-thaw cycles, and the city hasn't the funds to patch many holes. Cruddy and crumpled litter twists in soft breezes, derelict signage surrounding liquor stores promise chicken gizzards, lotto, cold beer, and hot sandwiches. As I bike through the neighborhood, going East on Mack Avenue, I feel the echoes of the deep south cradling me—indigo, rust, and oatmeal colored chickens roam backyards; richly green vegetables climb sky-high from raised beds amidst Detroit steel shined and polished; everyone you pass offers "how you doin'" as requisite display of sidewalk gentility.



The author's garden in an abandoned city-owned lot on Mack Avenue, prior to the 7th precinct's demolition. Photo courtesy Maya Stovall



The author's garden. Photo courtesy Maya Stovall

Living in McDougall Hunt feels like living a work of abstract art: it's undefined. Some days it's beautiful; some days it's dizzying. Sometimes I feel like I'm screaming in a silent film. A post-industrial, cartoonish post-post modern caricature of *Alice In Wonderland*, the landscape of my neighborhood is dotted at turns with dreamy pheasants, menacing guard-dogs, the weathered ready-mades of artist Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project, the lithe butterflies glinting through my garden in the summer and the raw, white icicles clinging to angular mature tree branches in the winter. LST is in dialogue with [the Heidelberg Project](#), in a cerebral, simmering, quiet, unofficial way. Guyton started his project in the 1980s during the crush of Detroit's crack and heroin explosion as a form of creative resistance. I started *LST* in Detroit 2014 to explore the pulsating blackness of the city. That is, the grit, the cool, the innovation, and the power that blackness has steeped here for decades.

LST brings and makes visible the already-present blackness, movement, creativity, the strange and the wonderful and the dynamic to spaces sometimes assumed to be fixed and impoverished. Why liquor stores? Liquor stores in Detroit sing the body politic. The scarcity of public parks and green spaces in this post-post-industrial zone leads to the emergence of the spaces surrounding liquor stores as what I think of as "improvised" urban spaces. In Photo 6, a little taste of the movement surrounding liquor stores is visible. A svelte woman who's passing through for some quick items rushes by in a blur of stilettos and sunglasses; a pair of neighborhood residents seek shaded green space and reprieve from the unrelenting Detroit sunshine; and an LST dancer, Nadia Chea, prepares to begin choreography in between filming.



Liquor Store Theatre, McDougall Hunt, Detroit. June 2014. Photo courtesy Maya Stovall



Artist Todd Stovall affixes his sculpture to the abandoned 7th precinct police station on Mack Avenue. McDougall Hunt, Detroit. November 2013. The 7th precinct has since been demolished and removed, and a multi-acre empty field remains. Photo courtesy Maya Stovall



Neighborhood men including artist Todd Stovall cleaning up an empty lot in McDougall Hunt, Detroit. Photo courtesy Maya Stovall

### **From Past to Present**

As a little girl growing up in Detroit, I had a thing for nesting dolls. My parents seemed to buy me a new set every year. One set of nesting dolls sits vividly in my mind's eye—pink skirt, brown skin, curvy black-ink-lines forming long wavy hair, red kerchief around neck, bright fuchsia mouth open in an expression of surprise, submission, or maybe delight. Each doll within the previous doll looks exactly the same, only with smaller and more precious ink-strokes. The choreography of the neighborhood, of Liquor Store Theatre's dance performances, of ethnographic conversations, are like these little nesting dolls. They are each distinct and autonomous but somehow, they copy each other. They mirror each other; they are in dialogue.



Liquor Store Theatre, McDougall Hunt, Detroit. July 2014. Photo courtesy Todd Stovall

In Photo 9, a stifling humid July afternoon has me breathing deeply in an attempt not to pass out mid-dance. I move through a series of architectural movements—very precise, structured, robotic movements inspired by the modern dance technique called Dunham, created by choreographer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham. Jacob proclaims from nearby “that’s modern dance.”

He also offers the Africanist encouragement—call and response and clapping—to support our performance. After this I interview Jacob, who is pictured behind me in Photo 9, and learn that he has lived in McDougall Hunt for over 40 years. He’s a historian of the area of sorts, listing the series of Mayors he recalls since Cavanaugh. A regular of this liquor store for 10 years, Jacob has observed a series of ownership changes and demographic shifts in the passersby coming to sports games downtown. After we speak I return to the dancing and I feel a presence oozing by me. Jacob’s behind me, dancing with me, mirroring my movements and in dialogue. He looks like a dancer, with his lithe movement and focused presence. I continue dancing, in a new conversation now *with* Jacob. There is nothing sexual, intimate, or even personal about our dance—it’s two bodies in motion, expressing, calculating, gauging, and shifting together on the sidewalk. For a moment there’s no gender, no class, no boundaries between us. We’re just moving. The sidewalk slides from under me while Todd intently takes photographs.



Liquor Store Theatre, McDougall Hunt, Detroit. July 2014. Photo courtesy Todd Stovall

The long-referenced metaphor between the ballet and sidewalk life is taken to task with this project at the pleats and seams of anthropology and art, choreography and ethnography, geography and dance. How does a city dance? What are our choreographies that shape social life? Can a vulnerable, dancing anthropologist do more equitable work—more fantastically bizarre work—to challenge assumptions and deeply probe human existence? LST is exploring and embracing McDougall Hunt with the intention of finding out.



Liquor Store Theatre, McDougall Hunt, Detroit. May 2015. Photo courtesy Martha Johnston

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