

Maya Stovall

# AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURAL TECHNOLOGY: THE LINDY HOP, THE KING OF POP, AND THE FACTORY WORKER'S EXPERIENCE

---

## Abstract

*African Americans have been integral in shaping the aesthetics of modernity generally, and with respect to dance in particular. Through labor, art, cultural technology, and social life, African American aesthetics have breathed life into modern and contemporary American culture. The stress and fatigue of machines, labor, capitalism, and racism, imposed on bodies during the industrial revolution and in the post-industrial era have provided raw material for black artistic expressions during the mid-to-late twentieth century. Furthermore, this artistic expression, fueled by the angst of changing times generally and tensions facing African Americans in particular, has served as American catharsis through the creation of innovative cultural expressions. This article analyzes the dialectical relationships of industrialization, racism, and modern aesthetics, through the lens of the innovative African American social dance form, the Lindy Hop; and the virtuosic pop performances of Michael Jackson. The important contributions of the Lindy Hop as a dance style and Michael Jackson as a performer have had a profound impact on the aesthetics of modernity in American social and popular concert dance. To better understand the relationship between industrialization and the African American shaping of aesthetics of modernity, this article analyzes black experiences and embodiment of industrial labor and the ways that African Americans drew from their particular experiences of industrial labor toward the creation of critical cultural technology.*

The Negroes of the USA have breathed into jazz the song, the rhythm, and the sound of machines.

—Le Corbusier

Michael Jackson both incarnates and transcends the trope of the human motor,

combining the virtuoso's seemingly mechanical exactitude with suprahuman charisma.

—Judith Hamera

## INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

African Americans have been integral in shaping the aesthetics of modernity. Through labor, art, science, and social life, African American aesthetics have breathed life into modern and contemporary American culture.<sup>1</sup> The stress and fatigue imposed on black bodies during the industrial revolution, and in the post-industrial era, have provided raw material for artistic expressions during the mid-to-late twentieth century<sup>2</sup> (Boris 1998; Boyle 1997; Dickson-Carr 2013). Furthermore, this artistic expression, fueled by the angst of the shifting era generally, and of the tensions facing African Americans in particular, has served as American catharsis in the process (Dinerstein 2003).

The notion of modernity as a Euro American-centered cultural movement has been previously upended. African Americans were central to the development of modernity; indeed, without the inexpensive and/or free labor that black bodies and labor have historically provided to the American economy, America's movement toward modernity would not have been possible (Dickson-Carr 2013). Further, close interaction between human bodies and machines during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries led to new conceptions of the human body and its possibilities. In other words, these interactions led to an energetic redefining of the body as having the capacity to function as a machine (de la Peña 2005). The machining of the human body had early applications in dance. Carolyn de la Peña writes of late nineteenth to twentieth century American dancer Loie Fuller's use of radium in costuming her

performances at the well-known Paris Opera House, the Folies Bergere (2005). In “The Body Electric: How Strange Machines Built the Modern American”, de la Pena asserts that technology itself was transmogrified into pulchritude through the use of the human body and its movements as a mode through which to display the scientific properties of radium. African American cultural technology is directly linked to bodily experiences of labor and marginalization, as well as the aesthetics emerging from critique of, release from, and resistance against oppression (Redmond 2013). The mechanization of the daily lives of African Americans, through urban life and factory labor, demanded a new aesthetic in music and dance, which African Americans created through the Swing Era (Dinerstein 2003). However, due to the complicated tensions between racism and cultural appropriations, African Americans have not been sufficiently credited with shaping critical aesthetics of modernity with respect to dance (Robinson 2010). Joel Dinerstein’s text, *Swinging the Machine*, outlines the contributions of African American cultural vernacular to the aesthetics of American modernity. Joel Dinerstein’s analysis of African American dancers’ use of the ideas and experiences of machinery as a “techno-dialogic” innovation underlines the fact that Blacks used technological advancements as cultural material in creating new and expanded forms of artistic expressions. And while Dinerstein’s work has moved our understanding forward, possibilities remain for building on previous scholarship that has considered African Americans’ role in shaping the aesthetics of modernity. In spite of the accretion of academic interest in technology as a form of cultural vernacular, the depth of scholarship on technology and race remains minimal (Brown 2004). Providing a more holistic understanding of African American experiences of the machine ages, including the realities of factory work within a racist cultural milieu, will enhance historical and cultural conceptions of modern aesthetic evolution. Toward this goal, this article analyzes the relationship between the industrialization of African American labor and modern aesthetics through the African American dance form, the Lindy Hop, and the mechanized performances of Michael Jackson. The important contributions of the Lindy Hop as a genre, and Michael Jackson as a performer, continue to have a profound effect on the aesthetics of modernity in American social and concert dance. I argue that these contributions were made possible through the affiancing of

factory work experiences with African American cultural technology<sup>3</sup>, which helped to shape aesthetics of modernity.

It is not novel to argue that African Americans shaped modernity through dance using the mechanization of the rhythms of the African continent. Dixon-Gottschild (1996) has written of the Africanist presence as a critical element in shaping American performance from the quotidian to the theatrical. In *Swinging the Machine*, Dinerstein (2003) examines the African American creation of mechanized rhythms and aesthetics through art and social life. Similarly, scholars have shown how African Americans used dance to mitigate tensions and directly contest racism, segregation, and systems of legalized oppression (Dixon Gottschild 1996; Dinerstein 2003; Robinson 2010; Wade 2011; Hamera 2012; Hancock 2013). What this article argues goes further: that the aesthetics of androgyny and technologic mechanization emerged first as performative expressions of survival of African American bodies on assembly lines. These aesthetics manifested specifically in both the Lindy Hop and in Michael Jackson’s theatrical dance performances, and continue to inform modern, post-modern, and contemporary dance aesthetics today.

This article performs a close analysis of the manner in which African American experiences of and interpretations of industrial work have shaped an aesthetics of mechanization and androgyny in modern social and popular concert dance. Specifically, I interrogate the relationship between African American work and mechanized movement in social and theatrical dance during the twentieth century.

In analyzing this question, I review the environment of early-twentieth century factory work and society through prior scholarship. The relationship between the bodily experiences of factory work and the bodily expressions of cultural technology will be explored through review of Lindy Hop performances of critical early-20th century performers Norma Miller and Frankie Manning. Following the implications of the swing era into contemporary society, Michael Jackson’s late-twentieth century performances are analyzed with an eye toward the development of African American cultural technology over time. By analyzing several dance scenes from the 1941 film, *Hellzapoppin’*, as well as three of Jackson’s most critically reviewed and acclaimed performances including the 1983 Motown Reunion, the 1984 Victory Tour, and the 1993 Super Bowl Halftime

Show, I argue that an aesthetics of androgyny and mechanization emerges. In all, research of existing scholarship and performance analysis is synthesized to identify connections between capitalism, African American factory work, and the ways in which African American experiences of factory work shaped a modern aesthetic.

Within American industrial labor, stratifications of value had been drawn beginning in the 1880s along lines of the social construct of race, as well as ethnicity and gender. Within these intersectional tensions African Americans found themselves in a precarious position (Robbins 2007). Factory workers were placed in competition with one another based upon race, ethnicity, and shift; there was an acute sense of being watched which no doubt impacted workers' performances (Coopey and McKinlay 2010). As African Americans attempted to navigate a technological landscape in which their labor was negatively differentiated from white labor, numerous challenges arose. The presence of White women and Black men together in the workplace was the ideal inflammatory content for those who wished to extinguish Black economic demands with White racist interests (Boris 1998; Boyle 1997). During the 1930s, African Americans and Latinos coalesced around shared challenges of factory work, class, and experiences of racism. The multi-ethnic solidarity present amongst blacks and Hispanics for instance in Tarrytown, New York, demonstrates the various modalities of resistance employed to negotiate the racist cultural milieu (Opie 2008). Adding gender to the analysis, Boris (1998:96) argues that African American women were to present themselves as "neater, pleasanter, more cooperative than their white counterparts, to make whites feel more comfortable around them". To combat and surpass racist sentiments imposed upon Black male and Black female bodies, African Americans embraced the trope of the human motor in a particularly androgynous, hyper-mechanized way. The trope or theory of the human motor, based in scientific materialism, remodeled the human body into the effigy of a productive, working machine, and revolutionized ideas of labor power (Rabinbach 1992). African American work was scrutinized more intently than white work—African American work was impeccable to be acceptable. Sexualization of African American bodies was such that performances of androgyny became defense mechanisms for both men and women in the context of factory work. Traversing from sex to labor, the critical importance of inter-

actions between bodies and machines has been considered previously in discussions of dance, factory work, and modernity. (Franko 2002). Like the notion of modernity itself, the human body in relation to factory work is shadowed by opportunity as well as by threat (Rabinbach 1992).

Aesthetics of modernity were shaped by machines, technology, and the fusion of the human and the suprahuman (Dinerstein 2003; Hamera 2012). The renowned modern architect Le Corbusier (1964) stated that "the Negroes of the USA have breathed into jazz the song, the rhythm and the sounds of machines." Underlining Le Corbusier's assertion, Dinerstein (2003:6) wrote that "Swing music rhythm's stylized mechanical repetition, creating and controlling propulsive rhythms capable of jump-starting fatigued bodies and depressed spirits. Euro-Americans watched and mimicked African American swing dancers, whose fast, dynamic whole-body dances modeled one method of rejuvenating American bodies." Le Corbusier, Dinerstein, and others have noted the critical contributions made by African Americans to the aesthetics of modernity through their unique engagement with urban centers and industrial work.

#### **ANDROGYNY AS SURVIVAL**

In "Androgyny and Stardom: Cultural Meanings of Michael Jackson", John Izod (1995) argues that cross-culturally, the androgyne avoids a sexually threatening presence through projection of an image that manifests both male and female characteristics. Androgyny is therefore asserted as a form of survival; a way to make oneself safe or non-threatening to exist peacefully in the world. Izod (1995) argues that Jackson's continued performance of juvenile androgyny rendered his image palatable for a variety of consumers. In this vein, African Americans employed androgyny as a method of survival, in an effort to contest stereotypes of hypersexuality perpetuated by racist agendas. In "An Investigation of Sex-Role Stereotypes in African Americans", Lennell R. Dade and Lloyd R. Sloan (2000) argue that the aesthetic of androgyny present in African American culture has deeper ancestral roots. They assert that "just as Africans see unity in the constructive and destructive forces existing in the universe, they also see masculinity and femininity as existing oppositionally in the individual" (Dade and Sloan 2000:678). These scholars contend that androgyny exists in African American culture as part of the conception that there is a holistic nature to all

humans. Furthermore, the scholars problematize the fact that the majority of academic writing on African American concepts of gender is written from a Eurocentric perspective (Dade and Sloan 2000). The problem with this is that to view Africanist cultural structures through Eurocentric perspectives and in comparison to European values will result in a failure to understand cultural variation (Dade and Sloan 2000). Moreover, contemporary anthropology must struggle continuously to liberate itself from the ethnocentric lens through which cultures have historically been analyzed (Erickson and Murphy 2013).

In "Monster Metaphors: Notes on Michael Jackson's Thriller", Kobena Mercer argues that within the popular African American music scene of the late-twentieth century, Jackson's androgynous performances were able to question the sex-role stereotyping of African American men. This stereotyping presented African American men as sexually aggressive and replete with machismo. Mercer (1993) contends that Jackson's performances are pleasingly insurrectionary in that they challenge sexualized stereotypes mentioned previously. Where did the need to subvert these sexual stereotypes emerge? I would argue that struggles to circumvent the negative stereotype of Black sexuality were both economically and socially based.

Due to the racist work environment, it was more difficult for African Americans to gain equal protection at work. This impacted African American women profoundly. The idea that African American women could better ensure protection from unwanted sexual advances through performances of respectability is asserted by Megan Taylor Shockley (2003) and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1992). In "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race", Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1992) asserts that early to mid-twentieth century black women, in compensating for racist attacks upon black sexuality, recast their sexuality through its absence and perdu. Although African American women's labor was extracted and commodified, Brooks Higginbotham contends, the fields of power and race/class domination abnegated black women of the right to their own sexuality. African American men experienced a related, yet different, manifestation of the socially constructed stereotypes imposed upon black people. In "You Wouldn't Want One of 'Em Dancing with Your Wife: Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War II", Eileen Boris writes that "those who defended segregation and dreaded social equality also associated sexuality,

bodies, and race" (1998: 79-80). White men who perceived the presence of black men in the workplace as a social or economic threat would present black men's sexuality as a threat to white women (Boris 1998). Indeed, racist paranoia surrounding contact between white women and black men led to violence in the workplace and in public spaces such as city buses (Boris 1998). I argue that performed androgyny on the part of black men was a strategy to present oneself as non-threatening in order to avoid retribution such as the violence Boris describes.

### **CAPITALISM, WORK, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN VERNACULAR TECHNOLOGY THROUGH DANCE**

In analyzing African American dance expressions, it is important to note that dance scholarship has been relatively neglected compared to other performing art forms of the twentieth century. Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1996:10) writes that "the pivotal role of dance has been trivialized while other performing arts (music, in particular) have been the focus of print documentation and scholarly attention." Kendra Unruh (2011) asserts that the majority of previous scholarship concerning the swing era neglects the critical contributions of dance. Social dance was a tool by which working class African Americans could challenge the dominant cultural milieu and expectations/disciplining of black bodies (Unruh 2011). The relationship between bodies, work, and capitalism is manifested in social and theatrical dance (Franko 2002; Kraut 2006). Through the lens of dance, we are able to observe performance-centered relationships between individual agency and political forces (Hancock 2013). In relation to the Lindy Hop, Unruh (2011:214) argues that "Black, working-class women not only found solace and escape in dancing but also a means to resist expectations for their race, class, and gender." Related, according to Judith Hamera (2010:756), "Jackson's repeated references to the burdens of his childhood and the image of the sharecropper, albeit disavowed, underscore the black body's very specific and intimate relationship to oppressive regimes of work." African American expressions of modern aesthetics have reflected the influence of industrialization and technological advancements and in particular have manifested in the world of dance (Rogers 1998). This is due in part to the exclusion of black people from traditional modes of technological expression on the basis of both race and class. The patent racism of the late nineteenth century

culminated with the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision in 1896 which legalized and required segregation in public places. Although African American inventors, engineers, and technologists existed, the racist and systematically oppressive cultural milieu would not allow broad African American participation in technological systems-building (Fouché 2006). A renowned black inventor of the time, Granville Woods, worked to create locomotive railway systems, for instance, and experienced institutionalized racism in the technical body politic (Fouché 2006). By developing their own cultural technologies through the creation of dances African Americans are able to claim a unique site of technological vernacular that they uniquely own and control. African American cultural technological vernacular refers to the particular artistic and aesthetic creativity representative of African American engagement in the interplay between the socio-cultural milieu, modes of expression, and technological advances.<sup>4</sup>

Despite African Americans' critical role in building and being American technology from the sixteenth through nineteenth century as enslaved persons and later as factory workers, African Americans have been largely excluded from conversations around technology as American culture. Amiri Baraka (1965) writes that the impact of technology on African American lives has been largely ignored, while paradoxically, technology has been credited with increasing quality of life for all Americans. Dinerstein (2003:22) provides insight on this idea by referring to the modern aesthetics present in twentieth century art forms as "survival technology." In, "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud: African Americans, American Artifactual Culture, and Black Vernacular Technological Creativity," Rayvon Fouché extends Dinerstein's theory which is informed by the hypothesis of Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1981) dialogic theory of language, by demonstrating how African Americans shape their own technological expressions and networks through creativity and innovation.<sup>5</sup> Fouché (2006:658) further argues the "need to reassess and expand our study of technology to examine how racially marginalized people, such as African Americans, interact with technology and how technology mediates multiple African American experiences with racism. To address African Americans and technology, we must think about the ways in which black people understand and experience race and racism - important realities of everyday black existence."

Fouché (2006:641) theorizes that "Black vernacular technological creativity is characterized by innovative engagements with technology based upon black aesthetics." Where Dinerstein proposes that African Americans engaged in the performance of Africanist-informed expressions of technology through anthropomorphic representations of machines and motors, Fouché (2006:642) extends the theory to include direct African American engagement with technological material culture through "redeployment, reconnection, and re-creation." According to Fouché (2006), the concepts of redeployment, reconnection, and re-creation refer to the ways in which African Americans modify, appropriate, and use technology in culturally innovative applications. I argue that these concepts also apply to the manner in which the aesthetics of mechanization and androgyny grew directly from racialized experiences of industrial labor.

African American workers of the twentieth century fed the industrial machine. African American men in the early twentieth century were subject to a particular sort of workplace abuse that centered around what historian George Lipsitz (1981) has referred to as being guided by "the connections between masculine self-affirmation, racial identities, and control over women." At the same time, the mechanization and tempo of industrialized life required a much faster processing, digestion, and expulsion of these harsh social realities for African Americans generally. According to Boris (1998), at the beginning of the end of the reconstruction era and the re-establishment of European American control of the former Confederate, sexualized stereotypes provided a modality of sustenance for White racism. Demonstrating the impact of stereotypes on African American daily life, Boris states that sexualized stereotypes were deployed to justify mob violence, including brutal lynchings against African Americans.

Moreover, demands to overcome workplace stereotypes for African Americans threatened the financial well-being of individuals, families, and communities (Boris 1998). In Detroit, workers were organizing directly in struggle with the racist plant environment. Workers of political groups problematized capitalism as needing racism in order to function (Thompson 2001). In terms of daily life, the racist factory work environment discussed by Boris, Lipsitz, and Unruh, caused Black people to enact workplace survival performances. These survival performances were characterized by

exceeding, challenging, and/or contesting racist stereotypes. With actions in the workplace, African Americans enacted survival performances of androgyny and hypermechanization, positioning themselves simultaneously as both excellent and non-threatening. Through intracultural transmission, the survival performances of African American workers inspired the aesthetics of performers of both social dance and theatrical dance. Virtuoso performers in social and theatrical dance forms exemplified the aesthetics involved in survival performances in black factory work. A review of critical performers of the mid-to-late twentieth century will allow further analysis of these survival performances' impact on dance aesthetics.

### THE LINDY HOP AS POSSIBILITY

The Lindy Hop, based in the African American aesthetics of hot and cold, high affect and low affect juxtaposition identified by Dixon-Gottschild (1996), was a human expression of the machine-based labor of industrialization. Dinerstein argues that the Lindy Hop was able to “reenergize Machine Age human bodies” (2003:251) through the incorporation of machine age aesthetics into the dance's character. Even the name of the dance, the Lindy Hop, drew on mechanical lore. The Lindy Hop is said to be named after American aviator Charles Lindbergh, for Lindbergh's non-stop solo flight across the Atlantic, traveling from Roosevelt Field on Long Island to Le Bourget Field in France (Dinerstein 2003). The notion of naming a social dance created and performed by working-class African Americans after a wealthy white man is oddly appropriate within the Eurocentric sociocultural milieu of the 1920s and 1930s. Although African Americans were creators of technological culture and arguably the most critical innovators of aesthetics of modernity, African Americans were also systematically excluded from the privileged realms of technology and industry. The Lindy Hop represented an ideal modality that would allow African American participation in the corporeality of technology creation.

When it burst on the dance scene in the 1930s, writhing, bounding, shaking, and whirling with mechanized force and stylized air moves, the Lindy Hop, was quickly anointed by New York City theatrical critics as an absolute must-see. In fact, the Lindy Hop was so popular that it was integral in initiating the Savoy Ballroom as a national tourist destination for whites, and the dance was even performed to sold-out crowds in Madison Square Garden (Dinerstein 2003). Although Africanist<sup>6</sup>

aesthetics are often incorrectly broad-brushed as including hypersexualized bodily rhetoric, the Lindy Hop was different. The overt lack of sexual connection between the dance partners simply could not be ignored, even by dance critics uninitiated to Africanist dance aesthetics.

The dance critic Carl Van Vechten stated that the Lindy Hop “Is not of sexual derivation, nor does it incline its hierophants towards pleasures of the flesh. . .these couples barely touch each other, bodily speaking. . .and each may dance alone, if he feels the urge. . .It is Dionysian, if you like. . .but it is not erotic” (1974:40). This asexual description of the Lindy Hop provided by a white dance critic of the early-20th century represented a relatively novel conception of an African American art form. The so-called uncontrolled sexuality and lack of self-control associated with rhythmic phrasing prevented a number of scholars and historians from recognizing the artistic merit of jazz and jazz dance (Dinerstein 2003). Van Vechten's ability to distinguish the aesthetics of the Lindy Hop as being “asexual” is notable. Without training in Africanist dance forms or aesthetics, many art critics of the early twentieth century were known to relegate Black music and dance aesthetics to expressions of sexuality. Paul Whiteman, a Euro American bandleader of the 1920s, claimed that he transformed jazz into a lady<sup>7</sup> through his appropriation of African American aesthetics and infusion of Euro American aesthetics (Whiteman and McBride 1974). Whiteman's gendered statement is not accidental in relation to the cultural milieu of the early to mid twentieth century. Both male and female African American bodies were objectified and stereotyped as untamed, hypersexed, and uncontrollable. Whiteman's claim that he “made a lady” of this raw and uninhibited woman that was jazz, directly quotes the misogynistic and racist world-view permeating 1920s and 1930s America—in the arts and in the factories. It was within this charged landscape that the Lindy Hop emerged as a technological artistic innovation.

### HABITUS AND THE LINDY HOP

Pierre Bourdieu (1990, 2000) and Lisa Wade (2011) indicate that the habitus is a primarily subconscious shaping of bodies, aesthetics, and thinking that happens over time. Quite literally, this theory claims that social configurations become lodged within and concretized by the human body (Wade 2011, Loïc Wacquant 2014). The Lindy Hop was an ideal site for the habitus of the factory and the survival mechanisms African Americans created to

be embodied. Dancers of the Lindy Hop were directly instructed to embody a certain degree of androgyny and to avoid use of gendered-binary corporeal movement (Wade 2011).

African American Lindy Hoppers of the 1920s–1940s made the combinations look utterly effortless according to dance historian and white lindy hopper Ernie Smith. Effortless may have been the impression, but the racist world-view of the historic period did not allow for such description. Detroit’s 1943 race riot reportedly stemmed from White rage surrounding a simple, brief dance on a public bus. The importance of the contestation of ownership of public spaces (Newman 2013) is made pellucid through a dance encounter turned fatal (Boris 1998). According to a government report, while on a public transportation bus leaving Belle Isle a White woman who had been drinking declared “I want to dance!” When a young Black man<sup>8</sup> sitting nearby obliged her and began dancing on the bus, the White men riding the bus forced the bus driver to pull over and proceeded to throw the Black man over the Belle Isle bridge railing, into the river, which was approximately a one hundred-foot drop (Catledge 1943). Sonorously, the androgyny and mechanized precision of the Lindy Hop would not have been sufficient to dulcify the ardently racist bus riders in this case. Whether it was the Lindy Hop or another social dance that the young man and woman performed before the young man’s death, we do not know. However, it was this racialized history that gave birth to the second generation of androgyny and technological precision embodied in African American aesthetics, which I argue is personified by Michael Jackson. The first generation of androgyny reflected in the Lindy Hop is characterized by a transformation of the human body to a moving singleton which is neither male nor female. Still, the male/female partner nature of the Lindy reflects a degree of gender-role canning. In the second generation of androgyny, the human literally is transmuted into a genderless machine. There is no reliable presence of gendered partnering (performances are solo, group, and pairings of all genders occur), and technology is central to the androgyny. In Michael Jackson’s performances, the role of digitization, machine-age references, and the cyborging of the body through androgyny is resonant.

Turning back to androgynous representations of machinery in the Lindy Hop, we observe the technical format of the step itself. The basic lindy

unfolds in an eight-count pattern. The feet move two steps on counts one and two, three steps on counts three and four, a single step each for five and six, and another triple step for the seven and eight counts. The partners alternate between an open position in which the leader holds in their left hand the follower’s right hand (the other hands are open and free) and a closed waltz position where the leader’s right hand is on the waist of the follower, and the follower’s left hand is on the leader’s shoulder blade. The uptempo nature of the eight count based combinations and the quick partner alignment switches require both dancers to be ready to lead or to follow on a dime. According to Dinerstein, Americans relied on dance during the swing era to “reclaim the human body as a site of joy and *human* power, of athletic and aesthetic display” (2003:253). The aesthetics of androgyny and mechanized precision framed so directly by African Americans in the Lindy Hop represented the delicate balance that they were required to strike to survive racist factory conditions. Analyzing the Lindy Hop performances of swing dance icons Frankie Manning and Norma Miller provide a closer look at aesthetics in action.

In the 1941 film, *Hellzapoppin’*, a number of members of the troupe, Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers, led the swing dance scenes. Two of the most captivating members were Frankie Manning and Norma Miller, legends in the swing dance world. One particular scene provides an amazing display of precise, androgynous virtuosity. The band has set the scene with a jam session, and the drums take over. As the drums reach a high point, Manning and Miller launch into a breathtaking rendition of the lindy. Slender legs whirling and arms flying, it is all about timing. The movements of each partner are completely dependent upon the other partner: one mistake could shut the whole line down, as autoworkers say. Manning flips Miller over his back, in the next moment she propels through this legs and flips yet again to stand on her feet again. Stressing the androgyny inherent to the Lindy Hop, the women also lift and flip the men frequently and with ease. The use of mechanics and physics here is undeniable: the slender women are outweighed by their dance partners, yet they are able to use the hyper mechanized movements and timing to make lifts happen easily. The dance partners routinely release and rejoin hands, shift from floor movements to air movements, and invoke a variety of movement styles into the eight-count pattern. Slick, sharp

moves alternate with flowing movement combinations, again, indicative of the start and stop character of the assembly line. This dynamic can be seen also in the 1947 concert performance of Frankie Manning's own Congaroos dance troupe.

As the Congaroos take to the stage, the jubilation of the dancers is palpable. Here, we see the importance of the dance as an escape. The Congaroos are dressed in tropical whites, and a single palm tree decorates the stage. Two couples perform in unison, literally an assembly line of movement. Each couple's movement are intra-dependent, but to succeed, all movements on stage must be synchronized. This hypermechanization of labor, in which one motion is dependent upon another set of motions, does indeed raise the stakes. The "pressure to perform" is increased when another person (or assembly line station) is awaiting another action to move forward. Turning to the Congaroos, we see these ideas in motion.

The men leap over the women, lift them with ease, and then two-step side by side. The androgynous partnering bears attention. While the costumes are gendered (the women of the Congaroos wear short, frilly white dresses, and the men, white linen slacks and shirts) the same cannot be said for the dance moves themselves. The shifting back and forth from a partnered style to an individual style shows the play of gender roles and the dialectic exchange between Africanist and European social dance idioms. The women exhibit just as much athletic prowess as the men, and their movements are equally virtuosic. The elaborate spins, jumps, slides, and lifts happen as a result of both precise mechanization and tightly synchronized order of events. As we look at the Lindy Hop, a dance manifesting and alleviating the intense factory culture of African Americans, we observe the makings of an innovative dance genre that exemplifies and exceeds human limitations and possibilities. Moving forward in the twentieth century to the Michael Jackson era, we see these aesthetics morph and evolve.

### **SUPERHUMAN/SUPRAHUMAN**

Building on the tradition of the suprahuman (exuding and exceeding the ultimate in human potential) precision and androgynous aesthetics of the Lindy Hop, Michael Jackson's performances are informed with technological, industrial aesthetics. Extending the analysis of the presence of factory-fueled African American aesthetics of modernity in contemporary era, I argue that Jack-

son's inspiration for mechanized, androgynous aesthetics emerged in large part from his Gary, Indiana roots in which his father Joseph Jackson was employed as a steel mill worker. Quite literally, Motown, where Jackson spent time developing his skills, was modeled by its founder Berry Gordy (who was a former auto worker with Ford Motor Company) as an assembly line which would produce top quality music stars, in part playing off of the way that Ford produced cars (Smith 2001). Gordy's combination of his own family's business savvy (plus a family loan) with the Ford-based concept of production led to an innovative model for producing artistic talent during the Motown era. But before coming to Detroit and entering the Motown milieu, Jackson's Gary roots had already given him an industrial pedigree.

Due to his industrial roots, Michael Jackson understood on a deep and embodied level the need for escape felt by African American workers. In the autobiographical text, *Moonwalk*, Micheal Jackson expressed that "a part of my earliest memories is my father's job working in the steel mill. It was tough, mind-numbing work and he played music for escape" (Jackson 1988:8). If emotions are repressed at work, there must be an escape in which these emotions are allowed to flow freely. Michael Jackson's transcendence and embodiment of the African American experience provide an ideal vehicle for exactly this.

Watching concert fan footage leading up to the 1984 New York City Victory Tour stop, it is clear in the fans' euphoric comments that Michael Jackson's awareness of this need for escape, and moreover, the escape offered by Michael Jackson's performances, is central to his appeal. When Jackson begins his performance of *Billy Jean* at the 1984 Victory Tour Concert, the entire mood in the stadium changes. It is as though Jackson has the ability to literally turn the air electric. His sharp and percussive attacks channel the specialized job function of an individual on the assembly line; while his smooth moves evoke the perfect functioning of an assembly line operating in totality. He is an individual worker and an entire assembly line, all at once. The electric start and stop movements of Michael Jackson's dancing, inspired by mechanized factory lines worked by his father and Berry Gordy, provides viewers with an escape that connects and pays homage to the physical experience of working on an assembly line.

At the Motown 25 Concert of 1983, tears stream down the faces of fans as Jackson gets to a vocal crescendo in *Billy Jean*. After belting out the



bridge lyrics, Jackson jumps up and down in jubilation for a few seconds, then becomes completely still. After stillness comes an electrifying, iconic movement combination—it is a gliding, smooth motion, powerful, mechanized, perfectly synchronized with the pulsing beat. Jackson’s loafers eat up the floor and his neck stretches forward with elegance and soul as he floats backwards in space. The movement is so natural, so easy, and at the same time the precision of the steps and the cleanliness of the phrasing are clearly not “easy” to execute. Yes, this is the first official introduction of Jackson’s now world famous Moonwalk dance move.

Michael Jackson’s perfected Moonwalk dance can be understood as a metaphor for the pursuit of excellence. In working to exceed expectations and in becoming a world famous pop star, Jackson was turned into a human machine. A product of capitalism and assembly line precision, Jackson mastered the art of perfect execution, flawless timing, and hypermechanization that performers today continue to seek.

Factory work in the mid-to-late twentieth century represented one of the most lucrative ways in which Americans and others of lower-to-middle economic class status could earn a decent living. However, if one is unable to gain acceptance in the workplace due to stereotypes, conflicts of a variety of degrees will occur and economic benefits may be challenged. Turning to Michael Jackson’s monumental, late twentieth century, ongoing performance of androgyny, it is possible to gain even more of a sense of how androgyny represented an aesthetic of opportunity and an aesthetic of transcendence, and as such was developed by African Americans as a form of survival. Although Michael Jackson never worked in a factory, his working class, Gary, Indiana pedigree, and his experience growing up a steel worker’s son apportioned him an understanding of African American industrial labor experiences. Mechanization and androgyny were critical to these experiences. Extending the importance of androgyny in Jackson’s career, it is important to note Jackson’s status as MTV’s first African American crossover artist (achieving tremendous popularity amongst viewers of all ethnic backgrounds) in relation to his performance of an androgynous aesthetic. Known for long hair, streamlined clothing, and falsetto exclamations, Jackson presented a non-threatening, androgynous (if not feminine) picture of an African American man’s sexuality (feminine expressions were at times balanced by a punctu-

ated glomming of the pelvic region, adding to an overall androgynous picture).

The Jackson’s 1984 Victory Tour was historically significant for a number of reasons. The tour represented the last time the full Jackson band (formerly known as the Jackson Five) appeared in concert with Michael Jackson. The event was also the largest grossing concert tour to that date, generating approximately \$75 million. At the time, Michael Jackson’s hit *Thriller* was at the top of all of the popular music charts; it was clear Jackson was the star responsible for attracting the worldwide attention the Victory Tour received. Jackson had grabbed hold of the public and was pulling them on a sojourn through his innovative performance.

When Michael Jackson performed the 1993 Halftime Show at Super Bowl XXVII, he was the first internationally renowned performer to do so. Indeed, Jackson’s 1993 appearance set the precedent of top popular music acts headlining the Super Bowl Halftime Show.

It was January 31 in Pasadena, California. It was Super Bowl XXVII and the Buffalo Bills were up against the Dallas Cowboys. Michael Jackson has been booked to perform the entire halftime show. This represents the start of a trend which has continued to present day of signing top performers to increase Super Bowl viewers. So here we are—packed stadium, attendance of 98,374, when Michael Jackson takes the stage.

With resplendent graphics that must have been futuristic in 1993 Michael Jackson emerges, larger than life, on what must be a 100-foot screen. Ominous synthesizer plays, an electronic music symphony promising the high-tech performance to come. Jackson’s wearing a glittering black and gold military style jacket, a pair of slick and sleek fitted black pants, white sport socks and dress shoes, a single white glove, dark aviator sunglasses, and his hair is streaming in loose curls around his face. Before we can understand what’s happening, he appears to be launched from inside the big screen where he was posing, by completing a series of innumerable, perfectly executed turns, to the top of the screen. Literally, the human Michael Jackson is birthed, on top of the screen, by the digital Michael Jackson’s hyper mechanized turns. The dialogue of human performance and technology is placed on center stage. The audience loves it; goes crazy. This sequence happens two more times, with Jackson’s image being catapulted from the screen, birthing his human body onto stages around the stadium. Jackson is time-

traveling; Jackson is flying. He is bending technology and human capability even before his show begins. The final launch lands Jackson stage center, ready to perform.

All 98,374 people are screaming wildly, cheering and clapping, non-stop, as Jackson stands up from his landing. His lean, lithe body is completely still, but visibly ready, like a cat arching its back preparing for a fight, or a sprinter lifting their hips preparing for the starter's gun. Jackson holds the crowd with his pure presence. As the next minute passes, the crowd's screams and cheers intensify as the anticipation builds. He holds the crowd, his body completely motionless, electrifying the stadium. The power of Jackson's presence, temporality, and his body in this space is center stage for over a minute. Then suddenly, he snaps into motion with a turn of the head so sharp and precise that it's like a dart being thrown squarely onto a bullseye. The show begins; the crowd intensifies. To watch Michael Jackson perform at the height of his fame in this concert is to watch a master at work. Fully possessing a rare virtuosity, Jackson is all angles, precise moves, a dialogue of ease and tension, flowing androgynous poetry in motion. He embodies gendered masculine power in one moment with a fast two-foot spin, and is marked by the gendered feminine in the next moment with a soprano utterance of pleasure. Jackson's performances of the 1980s and early 1990s represented desired qualities of industrial efficiency, speed, productivity, and the surmounting of physical fatigue (Hamera 2012). Simultaneously, Jackson's performances were a recognition of the close relationship between African American aesthetics and industrialization. Hamera asserts that through his virtuoso dance performances Jackson "reminded his audiences that this motor was 'ful of color' all along: performatively tricking back on the racist exclusions of black workers from the promises and rewards of industrialization by drawing on tropes of African American performances going back a hundred years" (2012:762).

## CONCLUSION

The relationships between industrialization, technological advance, racism, and African American aesthetics and modernity are deep and interwoven. The Lindy Hop evolved to combat racial stereotypes and release the tensions caused by factory work. Later in the century, Michael Jackson emerged from high octane virtuosity fueled by the struggles of black people in factories and

in life, including his own father's and family's, and the expansion of capitalism across global markets. This article argued the significant role of African American technological vernacular in shaping critical aesthetics of modernity aptly reflected in modern social and popular concert dance. Further, this article addressed the gap which has been identified (Brown 2004; Dickson-Carr 2013; Dinerstein 2003; Robinson 2010) in crediting African American cultural technology with development of critical aesthetics of modernity. The aesthetics of androgyny and mechanization central to American modernity directly emerged from African Americans through performative survival culture in the factories, on the assembly lines, in the trenches of industrialization. These aesthetics were then molded and shaped by the African American artists of the respective eras: Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Josephine Baker, Katherine Dunham, Ella Fitzgerald, Frankie Manning, Norma Miller, Michael Jackson, amongst others. Through survival performances necessary to subvert the structural violence and institutionalized oppression present in industrial labor, African Americans developed cultural technology that directly shaped social and theatrical dance. These contributions continue to evolve to this day. In recognizing the powerful effects of African American experiences of industrial labor and capitalism on the aesthetics of modernity, we observe both the reality of racism and the possibilities of cultural alchemy.

---

## Maya Stovall

Maya Stovall's research centers on performance; dance; race/ethnicity; gender; urban marginality & classification struggles; cities & urban spaces; and Detroit. Stovall's dissertation project, *Liquor Store Theater*, stages dance performances in the sidewalks surrounding Detroit party stores as a point of departure for ethnographic encounters on city streets. [www.mayastovall.com](http://www.mayastovall.com). *Cultural Anthropology*, Wayne State University, 3019 FAB, 656 W. Kirby, Detroit, MI, 48202; [maya.stovall@wayne.edu](mailto:maya.stovall@wayne.edu)

---

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to thank Alex B. Hill, Barry J. Lyons, and Andrew D. Newman, Wayne State University, for their comments.

Finally, the author's thanks are extended to the anonymous peer reviewers at *Transforming Anthropology* as well as the editors and staff.

## NOTES

1. Historians, dance scholars, art critics, anthropologists, sociologists, philosophers, and many others have devised categories of 'modern', 'post-modern', and 'contemporary' historical periods. Also, the term 'modernity', coined by Charles Baudelaire in the 1864 essay, "The Painter of Modern Life" has been employed widely to refer to the experience of industrializing city life. In this article, the term, 'modern', refers to both the general historical period (broadly, the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century) and the associated aesthetics; 'post-modern' refers to the mid-twentieth to the late-twentieth century; and 'contemporary', refers to early twenty-first century to present day. These terms dovetail in meaning and application depending upon the particular context and the author acknowledges the complexities.

2. It should be acknowledged that African American experiences, like the experiences of any cultural or socio-political group, are not monolithic. African Americans during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of course also resided in rural locales and worked in agriculture, for instance, amongst innumerable other residences and occupations. This article deals with a particular slice of urban, industrial life experiences of African Americans during the modern era, and the way that these particular experiences have shaped modern aesthetics and continue to shape contemporary aesthetics today.

3. Cultural technology refers in this article to the development, creation, and application of original, culturally-based art forms (in this case, dance styles). The dance forms serve a practical purpose and are based on 'engineering' and/or 'machining' of the human body which represents technological advance. This is also related to dance technique, of course. In this case, I am discussing cultural technology along the lines of Amiri Baraka (1965) and Fouché (2006)

4. It should be noted that Fouché rightly argues that more scholarship should be directed toward African American engagement with the actual forms and materials of technology itself. This article does not intend to diminish that goal, rather, it is focused on understanding the human body in relation to systems of oppression, the machine age, and

artistic aesthetics. An extended discussion of direct engagement of technological material is not within the scope of this particular paper.

5. Bakhtin's (1981) dialogic theory of language argues that all language is in dialogue (present, past, and/or future) with other language. In other words, language only exists in dialogue with other language. Dinerstein (2003) applies this idea to African American culture creation in the swing era.

6. Africanist aesthetics are defined by dance scholar and historian Brenda Dixon-Gottschild (1996) as a collection of aesthetics blending African and African American cultural metalanguage. Dixon-Gottschild outlines qualities of "the cool," opposition of forces (such as fast/slow, melancholy/joyous), polyrhythm, and vibrancy as central to Africanist aesthetics and the Africanist presence in dance. These Africanist aesthetics, of course, are so influential that they have become integrated into American aesthetics. It should be mentioned that the term Africanist has been reconnoitred by additional scholars. Toni Morrison (1992) has written of the Africanist presence in literature in the fiction of Cather, Hemmingway, and Poe, for instance. Depending on the context, definitions, geographies, and qualities of the Africanist will range. In this article, Africanist aesthetics follow the literature established by Dixon-Gottschild with respect to dance.

7. In addition to the Paul Whiteman historic quote, it is worth noting that the phrase "made a lady of jazz" has been also attributed to renowned educator and conductor Walter Damrosch. Damrosch is said to have quipped that "Gershwin has made a lady out of jazz" (Armitage 1938:189).

8. The black man was referred to as a boy in the quotation, leading one to question whether he was a minor under the age of 18, or whether the detractory use of "boy" was employed.

## REFERENCES CITED

- Baraka, Imamu Amiri.  
1965 *Technology & Ethos. Raise, Race, Rays, Raze: Essays Since 1965*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M.  
1981 *The dialogic imagination: Four essays by MM Bakhtin*. M. Holquist, Ed.; C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Boris, Eileen  
1998 "You Wouldn't Want One of Em Dancing With Your Wife": Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War II. *American Quarterly* 50(1):77-108.
- Boyle, Kevin  
1997 *The Kiss: Racial and Gender Conflict in a 1950s Automobile Factory*. *The Journal of American History* 84 (2):496-523.

- Brown, Elspeth H.  
2004 *Technology, Culture, and the Body in Modern America*. *American Quarterly* 56(2):449–460.
- Bourdieu, Pierre  
1990 *The Logic of Practice*. Oxford: Polity Press.  
2000 *Pascalian Meditations*. Oxford: Polity Press.
- Catledge, Turner.  
1943 “The Detroit Race Riots (A memorandum by Turner Catledge),” 3-4, box 5, file: Fair Employment Practices Committee: Franklin D. Roosevelt Library.
- Coopey, Richard, and Alan McKinlay  
2010 *Power Without Knowledge? Foucault and Fordism, c. 1900–50*. *Labor History* 51(1):107–125.
- Corbusier, Le.  
1964 *When the cathedrals were white*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Dade, Lennell R., Lloyd R. Sloan  
2000 *An Investigation of Sex-Role Stereotypes in African Americans*. *Journal of Black Studies* 30(5):676–690.
- Dickson-Carr, Darryl  
2013 *African Americans and the Making of Modernity*. *American Literary History* 25(3):672–682.
- Dinerstein, Joel  
2003 *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture Between the World Wars*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Dixon Gottschild, Brenda  
1996 *Digging the Africanist Perspective in American Performance*. Westport: Praeger.
- Erickson, Paul A., and Liam D. Murphy  
2013 *A History of Anthropological Theory*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Fouché, Rayvon  
2006 *Say it Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud: African Americans, American Artifactual Culture, and Black Vernacular Technological Creativity*. *American Quarterly* 58(3):639–661.
- Franko, Mark  
2002 *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, and Identity in the 1930s*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.
- Hamera, Judith  
2012 *The Labors of Michael Jackson: Virtuosity, Deindustrialization, and Dancing Work*. PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America 127(4):751–765.
- Hancock, Black Hawk  
2013 *American Allegory: Lindy Hop and the Racial Imagination*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn Brooks.  
1992 *African-American women’s history and the metalanguage of race*. *Signs* 17(2):251–274.
- Izod, John  
1995 *Androgyny and Stardom: Cultural Meanings of Michael Jackson*. *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal* 14(3):63–74.
- Jackson, Michael.  
1988 *Moonwalk*. New York: Random House.
- Kraut, Anthea  
2006 *Recovering Hurston, Reconsidering the Choreographer. Women & Performance*. *A Journal of Feminist Theory* 16(1):71–90.
- Lipsitz, George.  
1981 *Class and Culture in Cold War America: A Rainbow at Midnight*. South Hadley, Massachusetts: Bergin & Garvey.
- Mercer, Kobena.  
1993 *Monster metaphors: notes on Michael Jackson’s Thriller*. *Sound and vision: The music video reader*: 93-108. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Morrison, Toni.  
1992 *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Newman, Andrew.  
2013 *Gatekeepers of the Urban Commons? Vigilant Citizenship and Neoliberal Space in Multiethnic Paris*. *Antipode* 45(4):947–964.
- Opie, Frederick Douglass  
2008 *Eating, Dancing, and Courting in New York Black and Latino Relations, 1930–1970*. *Journal of Social History* 42(1):79–109.
- de la Peña, Carolyn T.  
2005 *The Body Electric: How Strange Machines Built the Modern American*. New York: New York University Press.
- Rabinbach, Anson.  
1992 *The human motor: Energy, fatigue, and the origins of modernity*. Berkeley, CA: Univ of California Press.
- Redmond, Shanna L.  
2013 *Detroit’s Idle: The Domestic Sounds of Labour’s Foreign Landscape*. *Race & Class* 55(1):60–77.
- Robbins, Richard H.  
2007 *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Robinson, Danielle  
2010 *The Ugly Duckling: The Refinement of Ragtime Dancing and the Mass Production and Marketing of Modern Social Dance*. *Dance Research* 28(2):179–199.
- Rogers, Richard A.  
1998 *A Dialogics of Rhythm: Dance and the Performance of Cultural Conflict*. *Howard Journal of Communication* 9(1):5–27.
- Smith, Suzanne E.  
2001 *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Taylor Shockley, Megan  
2003 *Working for Democracy: Working-Class African-American Women, Citizenship, and Civil Rights in Detroit, 1940–1954*. *The Michigan Historical Review* 29(2):125–157.
- Thompson, Heather Ann  
2001 *Whose Detroit?: Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Unruh, Kendra  
2011 *From Kitchen Mechanics to “Jubilant Spirits of Freedom”: Black, Working-Class Women Dancing the Lindy Hop*. *Journal of Pan African Studies* 4(6):213–233.
- Van Vechten, Carl.  
1974 *The Dance Writings of Carl Van Vechten*. New York: Dance Horizons.
- Wade, Lisa  
2011 *The Emancipatory Promise of the Habitus: Lindy hop, the Body, and Social Change*. *Ethnography* 12(2):224–246.
- Wacquant, Loïc.  
2014 *Homines in extremis: What fighting scholars teach us about habitus*. *Body & Society* 20(2):3–17.
- Whiteman, Paul, Mary Margaret McBride.  
1974 *Jazz*. North Stratford, NH: Ayer Company Publishing.

## VIDEO REFERENCES CITED

“Michael Jackson - Billy Jean (Live-1983),” YouTube video, 4:58, posted by “Canal de Thealessandro360live”, June 26, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnhXbuaUbmY>.

“Michael Jackson - Super Bowl (Complete Version) (HQ),” YouTube video, 12:47, posted by “Arslan Latif”, November 30, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=idg8TNknvDU>.

“The Jacksons - Victory Tour New York 1984 (Full Concert),” YouTube video, 1:25:46, posted by “MJHumbertoV”, November 18, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZps5yxum04>.

“Hellzapoppin’ (1941 - d.i. H.C. Potter) ITA,” YouTube video, 1:16:56, posted by “Nonsonocretino1”, February 5, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMG3RRCKoBA>.

“Harlem Congaroos Featuring Frankie Manning,” YouTube video, 2:26, posted by “Savoy Hop,” June 12, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bv71UziaMTM>.

“Hellzapoppin’ (1941) - Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers w/ Dancers’ Names,” YouTube video, 3:00, posted by “SwingcatVB,” August 10, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSAOV6XEjXA>.