

Collective Choreography for Weathering Black Experience: Janelle Monáe and The Memphis "Tightrope" Dance

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During a 2010 tour of the United Kingdom, artist and musician Janelle Monáe visited the BBC Radio 1Xtra show with MistaJam to promote her 2010 album *The ArchAndroid* and its first single “Tightrope.” Dressed in black riding boots and a military jacket reminiscent of Michael Jackson’s 1980s fashion, she gave MistaJam a dance lesson. What Monáe calls the “Tightrope” dance—choreographed by Ladia Yates in collaboration with Lil Buck and Dr. Rico[1], but formally credited to “Janelle Monáe and the Memphis Jookin’ Community”[2]—involves mostly footwork reminiscent of West-African Juba dance, the Cakewalk social dance from the nineteenth century,[3] and Jackson’s 1983 Moonwalk dance. The Tightrope dance’s main influence is jookin,’ a social dance style rooted in Memphis, Tennessee, that emphasizes smooth footwork and steps. It concludes with Monáe lifting one foot in the air and moving it in a zigzag or S-like motion, keeping her other foot on the ground while switching her ankle from left to right. Another person behind the scenes recorded her teaching the dance and the show uploaded the footage to Youtube. Despite the video’s low quality, it captures Monáe’s bodily and verbal explanations of the dance. The recording may be just one of many Tightrope dance lessons given by Monáe, perhaps during similar promotional interviews. Here, Monáe presents the dance verbally over the airways and visually through a video that has amassed about 30,000 views. Through this private yet very public performance of movement, she expands the radio space’s potentiality for cultural production.

I argue that the Tightrope dance acknowledges in its name and choreography the physical risk of black embodiment in the U.S. and offers emotional stability, physical balance, spontaneity, and support as navigational tactics. In reading Monáe’s explanation of the dance as a choreography of healing, I place her historically and theoretically in a lineage of black women performers and performance theorists, specifically Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham. In so doing, I archive the Tightrope as a dance as well as an account of human experience that indexes the pain and trauma of black life in the U.S. while proposing motion as a conduit for healing. Monáe’s contributions within the lineage reflect contemporary concerns about racialized embodiment emblemized by the Obama presidency. The Tightrope dance involves citational combinations of small steps from several performers, which encourages and helps to inscribe a collective social choreography of past, present and future black bodies navigating America .[4] Monáe expands the movement to include herself (as well as bodies and identities like hers[5]) within popular culture—alongside black women vocalists who are also skilled dancers, such as Beyoncé, Ciara, and Janet Jackson—but with a focus on highlighting Memphis’s signature move(s) as ones that, through embodiment, enact survival and triumph. Additionally, I contextualize Monáe’s choreography of black embodiment through racism’s ongoing effects on black women’s bodies and futures. Arline Geronimus’s “weathering” hypothesis proposes that black women’s health in the US deteriorates early and continues to decline due to struggling socioeconomic environments.[6] Geronimus notes an urgent need for collectivity (one of her proposals is the use of black doulas) to combat this deterioration.[7] I integrate this concept with Christina Sharpe’s recent theorization of “the weather” as the climate of

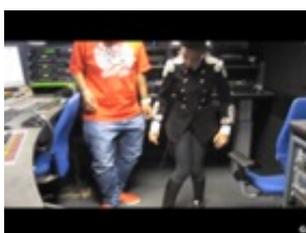
antiblackness to establish the atmosphere that Monáe navigates. [8] A close reading of Monáe’s radio show appearance reveals potential sites where the Tigtrope dance functions as a healing ritual, a mode of survival, and a collective citational practice, all of which foreground the contributions of black women.

Tightroping Terrains

To help with “reading” Monáe’s lesson alongside hearing and/or watching, I transcribed the radio segment into a text. Through this transcription, I treat Monáe’s explanation as a form of dance notation.

“Make sure you have two legs or two feet, or use whatever you can.”

At first Monáe comes off as a bit ableist, saying that participants should have two legs and/or two feet. However, she concludes the same line suggesting moving any body part within personal limits. Her first instruction and tool somewhat reflect a common assumption in the dance world of an able, physical body, yet she emphasizes right from the beginning that anyone is capable as long as they move what they have and use creativity, imagination, and/or personality. A similar approach valuing flexibility is apparent within yanvalou—an embodiment praxis of Haitian Vodou[9]—as Elizabeth Chin reports of Katherine Dunham’s research: “Under life’s often harsh demands...it is better to take on the present situation than to wait until the ‘proper’ tools are at hand.”[10] Monáe prepares her listeners to follow along but also to re-imagine the Tigtrope dance for themselves.



Monáe teaching the beginning steps of the Tigtrope dance to MisterJam.[11] Screenshots by author.

“These two feet go in and out opposite. You see how my feet are, you put the heel in front of the arch. So stay like this and go in and out. So first do that, you have to get familiar with that. So then, you’re going to take this front foot, and instead of being so mechanical-like, you gotta be smooth-like... You can do it on all floors.”

Monáe makes sure to establish foundational movements and foot positions that allow dancers to build up the Tightrope dance from spaces where they feel most comfortable. She does get technical in terms of placement, reminiscent of the discipline behind codified dance forms, including Katherine Dunham’s technique. The Dunham Technique—inspired by her interests including Haitian folklore, yoga, karate, Balinese dance, Russian folk dance, flamenco, and ballet—was understood by Dunham as a form of social justice anthropology that operates and moves through the body, centering the body as the source of experience and knowledge over text-based theory.^[12] The movement of the feet, which develops an openness upward towards the hips, loosens any rigidity and prepares the body for accompanying parts of the dance. The idea of “getting familiar” implies the capability to dance anywhere, on any floor or ground.

“Once you get it, you’ll be able to understand this floor.”

Not only does Monáe propose that people can do the Tightrope dance on any floor, but she also connects dancing the choreography to navigating social environments and their particular atmospheres. Through dancing, people learn and understand the ground they move upon, as well as the history of those who’ve moved before. By understanding dynamic relationships of the floor and the body, people can hone their abilities to dance within constrained areas and circumstances.





Mon e performing the S-like foot movements of the Tightrope dance. Screenshots by author.

“Like right now, I don’t have on my saddle oxfords, I have on my riding boots, but that just goes to show [the] tightrope can be done in all shoes, once you get that confidence...So now since we have the basics, you have to be smooth, see how I’m sliding in?”

In these lines, there’s a correlation between establishing confidence through wearing clothes/shoes of preference while dancing, but also through the development of “smoothness” once one has the essential beginning steps down. As a verb, “smooth” means to “give (something) a flat, regular surface or appearance,” “modify (a graph, curve, etc.) so as to lessen irregularities,” “deal successfully with (a problem or difficulty)” or to “free (a course of action) from difficulties or problems.”^[13] A common connotation is the ability to take on difficulties or problems with grace and eventually “smooth” them out. “Smooth” refers to moving gracefully despite but also because of mental and/or material obstacles. From Dunham’s perspective, achieving this sense of “smooth” evolves from the dancer’s deep self-knowledge, which extends “outward” and allows for “both self-healing and self-protection.”^[14] Dunham elaborates:

I’m telling you as a friend you must develop your whole body to match. One part to match the other, it is wholistic [*sic*]...you’re not teaching Dunham Technique unless you take each single person and know that person. You have to know that person. By knowing yourself. Then you can feel into it.^[15]

Self-awareness in movement opens up opportunities for healing, as well as identifying suppressed pain or trauma, interpreted as “smoothing things out” or “being smooth.” The correlation of confidence with “smooth” matters, considering the crisis of confidence black women experience as deeply marginalized bodies and voices navigating routes that are anything but smooth.





Monáe demonstrating the Tightrope dance's flexibility, regarding ability to move across the floor. Screenshots by author.

“Now I’m just real smooth...Now let’s just say you keep this [back] foot static...Now the key is the tightrope is an illusion dance. I wanted to give the illusion, while working with kids in Memphis, Tennessee...that you were levitating off the ground, just an inch or two. So basically, this foot actually never touches the ground, that’s the key. That’s why it looks smooth, like I’m not touching the ground, this foot is not touching the ground, it cannot.”

Monáe declares she has confidence, smoothness and self-awareness, partly through knowing herself as well as her historical position and her influences. She calls the Tightrope an illusion dance, as she creates the visual effect of levitating, that is inspired by young movers in Memphis, an important place for black dance and music historically in the US.^[16] The Tightrope is an optical illusion dance, similar to Jackson’s Moonwalk, as Monáe simulates moving along a tightrope and/or dancing in air. One could also consider the Tightrope as an allusion dance. Through dancing and teaching the Tightrope, Monáe is intentionally and unintentionally alluding to artists before her in a performative citational practice. She draws these allusions choreographically without always verbalizing her sources outright. Monáe’s explanation aligns with Hurston’s theorization of “Negro expression” and Dunham’s evocation of spiritual ancestors through her technique.^[17] These interactions of channeling and citation allow for Monáe to honor those who came before her as well as establish new accessible spaces of movement within the black performance archive.





Monáe going back and teaching MisterJam the first groundings, movements and positions of the Tightrope. Screenshots by author.

“You know you can’t get too high, you can’t get too low, you gotta tip on that tightrope, but never let that foot touch, never let that foot touch the ground, that’s wrong...you can do it on the side, you see?...Are you catching the feet?...Even if I go down, this foot never, never touches the ground...”

Here, Monáe quotes the lyrics of her “Tightrope” song. When verbalizing the dance while moving, the lyrics help to theorize the work that her body is already doing. Her questions insist on her self-worth: “*Are you watching me and how I can navigate most scenarios? I matter.*” This insistence on self, as a black woman, is a form of “weathering.” Monáe repeatedly reminds her audience that she is enough in a world that expects black women to endure pain with ease. Her attention to her foot never touching the floor/ground implies calibrated knowledge of multiple “grounds” in order to develop the ability to remain upright. This type of grounding requires being vulnerable and knowing oneself despite society’s push to conform black women’s bodies into being, moving or presenting in particular ways. Dunham, Hurston, and Monáe resist stereotypes on their paths to freedom through activism and performance, while also understanding freedom’s constraints and demands.[\[18\]](#) Dunham discusses black embodied resistance as building upon personal energy:

There is an energy within...we are given the capacity to use it. We use it in a way that is part of our basic culture. We use it in a way that we have been trained to...or maybe we use it in a way that results when all training drops off, and the clear pure strength of the person comes through. And that is the energy of that person, which is put into different forms...but once we discover that energy, I think that such a thing as dance becomes such a delight, because you’re moving on a stream that is you but is over and beyond you.[\[19\]](#)

During one of her master classes, Dunham elaborated on her “wholistic” approach to understanding the self through the body and thus understanding energy and how to heal.[20] Monáe’s explanation of the Tightrope dance involves a similar self-awareness of the body moving, participating in a collective development of tactics to heal black women’s bodies as they weather U.S. culture.

Theoretical Coordinates—A Flight Plan

I began thinking about Monáe’s Tightrope dance as a possibility for healing and liberation after reading Soyica Diggs Colbert’s treatment of the Flying Africans myth[21] and its “black diasporic representations” in music.[22] Her analyses of LaBelle’s fashion during the 1960s and 1970s, Parliament’s lyric transition from sea-ship to space-ship, and Kanye West’s song sequencing, sampling, and lyrics to “I’ll Fly Away” and “Spaceship,” demonstrate black musicians’ manifestation of or connections to flight as liberation. These artists navigate oppression and create routes toward a new world within American geographies through the concept of flying, or lifting black bodies over limited systems of public transport. The fantasy of flying to Africa stems from collective hope while enduring the historical trauma of being black in America since chattel slavery, where gender discrimination, homophobia, mental illness, racial inequality, transphobia, and violence are persistent phenomena. As Colbert notes, the concept of flying happening within bodies through music, as well as social movements on the ground like marches, enables alternative forms of embodiment.[23] Colbert briefly mentions Monáe’s innovative style and “reclamation of black beauty” through her “android” identity.[24] Although Monáe’s fashion is important for her project of acceptance and self-esteem, her choreographic aesthetic and potential also contributes to the evolution of flight within black bodies, as well as offering other frames.

In order to further develop how Monáe’s explanation and performance of the Tightrope dance could operate as a work of embodied flight and liberation, in addition to being a form of healing, I compare and connect it to earlier examples within the history and theory of black U.S. American performance. Analyzing and positioning the Tightrope dance as collective choreography, and a mode of healing, stems from a history of black performers and scholars in America, notably black women performers. Notating Monáe’s radio show appearance reveals strong affinities with both Hurston’s theory regarding black community/collectivity as well as Katherine Dunham’s exploration of movement as self-healing in her research and development of Dunham Technique. Hurston and Dunham’s theorizations of the liberatory possibilities of black performance can be usefully triangulated with dance scholar Danielle Goldman’s theorization of improvisation as a practice of freedom, a connection that Monáe’s choreography manifests in its use of improvisational structures.[25] Reading Monáe alongside these cultural anthropologists, dancers, and theorists, as well as considering improvisation as praxis, invites deeper insights into the Tightrope dance’s potentialities.

The Harlem Renaissance was one of the first sites where black American artists and innovators began to write about and theorize their performance traditions. Both the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance took place during the 1920s, bringing forth black Americans as originators of and contributors to mainstream culture, in both obvious and covert ways. Scholars Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez describe the rise of commentary regarding black performance by “Negro” and “colored” artists in their introduction to their collection *Black Performance Theory*. [26] DeFrantz and Gonzalez emphasize scholar and writer Zora Neale Hurston as one of the first theorists to commit herself fully to black performance through her short article “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” which was published

in the anthology *Negro* in 1934. They highlight that her writing, alongside the other researchers of the Harlem Renaissance era, “predicted a broad interest in understanding African diaspora performance. The implications of Hurston’s short essay still stand: black performance derives from its own style and sensibilities that undergird its production. And black performance answers pressing aesthetic concerns of the communities that engage it.”^[27] Hurston’s influence is present in Monáe’s explanation of the Tightrope dance choreography as a site for theorizing black expressive culture, and shapes my reading of her dance lesson with MistaJam as notation.

In “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Hurston highlights that action words and drama distinguish black performance.^[28] Hurston writes that black people’s greatest contributions to language include their interpretation and use of metaphor and simile, “double descriptives,” as well as the use of “verbal nouns” for adornment such as: “sense me into it,” or “Jooking—playing piano or guitar as it is done in Jook-houses...”^[29] She goes on to discuss the differences between “Negro dancers” and “white dancers,” starting with “Negro dance” being angular^[30] and asymmetrical due to its musical influences and thus presenting challenges for white dancers:

The presence of rhythm and lack of symmetry are paradoxical...Both are present to a marked degree. There is always rhythm, but it is the rhythm of segments. Each unit has a rhythm of its own, but when the whole is assembled it is lacking in symmetry. But easily workable to a Negro who is accustomed to the break in going from one part to another, so that he adjusts himself to the new tempo.^[31]

She writes that black dancers had to dance through certain limitations, therefore encouraging an adaptive and improvisational style instead of always performing fully rehearsed pieces.^[32] Hurston additionally includes a brief dance notation as an example of black dancers’ dynamism and reliance on the audience.^[33]

Although she observes artists and performers as originators, Hurston also discusses the paradox of authenticity due to the difficulty of tracing origins: “It is obvious that to get back to original sources is much too difficult for any group to claim very much as a certainty. What we really mean by originality is the modification of ideas...While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use.”^[34] Black artists created through navigating forms of mimicry and re-interpretation, which in turn were re-interpreted by white artists in ongoing cycles of appropriation.^[35] This idea of sharing, Hurston notes, is central to black tradition through the role of community and an attendant “lack of privacy”: “It is said that Negroes keep nothing secret, that they have no reserve. This ought not to seem strange when one considers that we are an outdoor people accustomed to communal life.”^[36] She also discusses the Jook at length, as both a verbal noun and a space, which is pertinent to the Tightrope dance’s origins: “Jook is the word for a Negro pleasure house. It may mean a bawdy house. It may mean the house set apart on public works where the men and women dance, drink and gamble. Often it is a combination of all these...The singing and playing in the true Negro style is called ‘jooking.’”^[37] She writes that black people created dances within Jooks before they circulated to other Jooks and then eventually to mainstream culture, citing the “Black Bottom” dance, originating in “the Jook section of Nashville, Tennessee, around Fourth Avenue,” as an example. Jooking or the Jook is a form of vernacular dance, or “Negro social dance” accompanied by jazz that is “...slow and sensuous. The idea in the Jook is to gain sensation, and not so much exercise. So that just enough foot movement is

added to keep the dancers on the floor.”[38] Although origins of social dances are constantly contested, roots in both place and purpose for movement remain significant to discussions within black performance.

Hurston’s emphasis on action words and drama connect to the Tightrope dance through its terms: “tightrope,” “tippin’” and joined together through “tip on the tightrope.” Starting with the word “tightrope,” Monáe brings people into the air. Tightroping is like horizontal flying in a way, as one moves their body forward along an unstable route traversing huge gaps of space without substantial support. Sharpe’s “weather,” or an ongoing climate of anti-blackness, is by design unstable, thus tightroping becomes a survival tactic that is a teachable skill and form of preservation.[39] The route Monáe describes could also be on earth or over water, and she assures people that one can do the dance in any shoes.[40] Her description of elevation and “tippin’” on the tightrope points to potentialities of balance and flight as navigational modes instead of a one-time thrill-seeker’s stunt. Possibly through observation of the physical strains previous male-read performers placed on their own bodies (James Brown, Michael Jackson, and Prince all played with balance, flight, and forms of “tippin’” in their choreographies), Monáe says the Tightrope dance can be performed on “any” ground, while incorporating a slight risk with the illusion of levitation. At the same time, she decreases the risk of injury by keeping her feet closer together while dancing. This proximal shift emphasizes sustained awareness and self-care of black women’s bodies.

Place and spectatorship also play a role within Monáe’s explanation of the Tightrope dance. In Jayna Brown’s cultural history of African-American women performers during modernism, she positions black vernacular dance as a way to claim a sense of place, relation, and community during the black migration: “For black people, dancing was an analogous creative response to shared and individual experiences of dislocation and relocation, itinerancy, and the fraught negotiations of claiming a geographical space to call home.”[41] Brown further describes how black expressive movement developed “gestural languages” within cities while simultaneously shaping those cities through social exchange, racial dynamics, and the back and forth of dance as gift or commodity. We might understand the radio station as a jook, where Monáe’s dance further develops and/or gains traction. Monáe’s performance involves people learning and recognizing movements as temporarily hers, then participating and eventually contributing their own versions, with variations of tempo and how high or low people lift their limbs. The dance offers opportunities for self-expression and individuality through the ways in which bodies maintain balance while performing it, as well as where and how they choose to move. Goldman’s work on improvisation speaks to the opportunities Monáe creates, such as knowing how to dance on specific “floors” and how to improvise in order to navigate particular experiences and terrains.[42]

Monáe’s explanation of the Tightrope dance echoes Goldman’s claims about aesthetic and social choreographies of improvisation and their relationship to notions of freedom:

After countless hours watching both live and recorded improvisations (and having been moved greatly in the process), I have come to believe that improvised dance involves literally giving shape to oneself by deciding how to move in relation to an unsteady landscape. To engage oneself in this manner, with a sense of confidence and possibility, is a powerful way to inhabit one’s body and to interact with the world.[43]

Goldman further discusses some misconceptions about improvisation, mainly a popular emphasis on improvisation as spontaneous, rather than a learned technique that involves preparation, "...thereby eliding the historical knowledge, the sense of tradition, and the enormous skill that the most eloquent improvisers are able to mobilize." [44] Goldman adopts Houston Baker's term of "tight places" to understand distinctions in mobility constraints and possibilities based on race, class, gender, sexuality, and historical shifts in social positions. [45] "Tight places" relates back to Geronimus's "weathering" through black women's childbirth experiences and how they usually need assistance within the black community to receive necessary care. Sharpe's idea of a climate of anti-blackness assists in visualizing what creates and sustains "tight places" of discomfort—such as non-adequate health care for soon-to-be black mothers as well as systematic oppression against black women—and how these communities improvise and find alternative routes in order to survive. Goldman calls improvised dance a "vital technology of the self—an ongoing, critical, physical, and anticipatory readiness that, while grounded in the individual, is necessary for a vibrant sociality and vital civil society," that has potential to affect the dancer as well as the social landscape that the dancer both dances within and weathers. [46] Viewing improvisation as a type of technology or tool further contributes to my analysis of Monáe's explanation and performances of the Tigh trope dance as sites for healing and navigation.

Monáe uses the Tigh trope dance to redefine Baker's "tight places." The dance as a way of navigation opens up space by improvising alternative modes of thinking about access and identity. Improvisation and its possibilities for individuality within choreographic structures are prioritized in the Tigh trope's performances in the radio station and beyond, including larger-scale produced performances and the official music video wherein Monáe and accompanying dancers move in multiple directions, while adding their own micro movements in between group choreography. The "Tigh trope" music video, directed by Wendy Morgan, begins with Monáe in an asylum called "The Palace of the Dogs," which doesn't believe dancing is healthy and the people living there are constantly monitored. Monáe sets the tone by temporarily avoiding the surveillance, which include tall, cloaked beings with mirrors for faces, reminiscent of Maya Deren's 1943 short experimental film *Meshes of the Afternoon* [47] and "tigh tropes" her way to an open room to dance freely with other artists like herself. The Palace here symbolizes any "tight place" where one confronts themselves and their social position of not being acceptable or worthy of acknowledgment, and still maintains balance. The other residents of the palace join Monáe during both the initial introduction of the Tigh trope dance and during the breakdown and improvisation near the end of the video. They develop their own variations of the Tigh trope's balance-based choreography. The "Classy Brass" section of the video involves all the residents dancing. Monáe reminds listeners that life is a tigh trope for creative marginalized communities, as a deeper voice in the background sings what I decipher as: "well it's a thin line...I mean white line...you and your right mind," while Monáe is singing "gotta keep my balance" and "something like a Terminator." She provides vocal runs to her own mix, concluding with a melody of her singing "Happy Birthday" and saying "Do you mind if I play my ukelele?" repeatedly, which works to celebrate black existence and experience. [48]

During her performance of "Tigh trope" on the reality television show *So You Think You Can Dance*, her back-up dancers come out right before the chorus and do the Tigh trope in different directions while she focuses on vocals. During the song's breakdown, Monáe performs improvisational footwork. The ensemble dances in a circle, giving everyone a chance in the spotlight. One dancer does the Moonwalk across the floor while wiping sweat off their forehead with a white handkerchief. They all get in a line and do the Moonwalk moving forward instead of backward in four directions before concluding the performance with an emphasis on the Tigh trope dance. In addition, during her performance at the 2011

Nobel Peace Prize Concert in Oslo, Norway, her back-up singers do variations of the Tightrope dance. [49] Individuality and knowing oneself are key in executing the Tightrope throughout performance, as every dancer has a different approach and their own experiences that contribute to their interpretation.

Katherine Dunham's ethnographic research in Haiti and development of her own dance technique supports a reading of the Tightrope dance as a form of healing and spiritual connection to the self. Scholar Elizabeth Chin positions Dunham's dance within the context of healing, [50] performance, and social resistance, arguing that Dunham proposed a radical reimagining of anthropology through "(black) bodies dancing (black) ethnographic knowledge...putting anthropology on its feet, into bodies, and onto stages." [51] Throughout her lived experience as a black woman, Dunham was inducted into "the performative requirements of blackness" and the ways in which blackness functioned for white people to both define and manipulate. [52] She was invested in the physical and spiritual elements of yanvalou not solely for its "Africanness" and form, but also because it aligned with her vision of healing and understanding the world. [53] The Tightrope dance develops moving through and gaining the ability to weather past, present and future movement(s) as a healing praxis for both the self and the community. Monáe and her dancers make footwork a site for black pleasure, spontaneity, stability, and support instead of drudgery.

Dunham stated that she had to "take something directly" if she wanted to fully express a culture, similar to Monáe's practices of appropriation and interpretation of Memphis jookin': "The techniques that I knew and saw and experienced were not saying the things that I wanted to say. I simply could not, with purely classical ballet, say what I wanted to say...to capture the meaning and the culture and life of the people, I felt that I had to take something directly from the people and develop that." [54] Within her Dunham Technique, the emphasis on breath as that which "sustains what we're putting forth" [55] provides an aesthetic practice akin to Sharpe's emphasis on the importance of aspiration for black bodies and the need for freedom to breathe, as well as move, within and through "the weather." [56] Chin further explains the significance of yanvalou to Dunham's practice, emphasizing its never-ending cyclical structure and circular motions. [57] Dunham's understanding of breath and circling have particular resonance with Monáe's dance. Circles, cycles, and circling back are significant within the Tightrope dance's choreography. The dance includes an S-like tracing of the foot in air, very similar to the figure of infinity represented and repeated during bodies-in-yanvalou. The senses of infinity as well as being whole within the symbols traced in these dances emphasize the persistence and strength of the black community throughout history. They bring forth reminders and strategies of collective embodiment that guide black people through surviving the highs and lows of an anti-black climate.

"And I'm still tippin' on it" [58]—Tightroping the Black Public Sphere

Monáe theorizes the Tightrope dance as a collective, conceptual, and embodied antidote for living and moving in the US while black. For example, her articulation for possibly performing the movement "on all floors" and "in all shoes, once you get that confidence" might suggest moving through a local corner store or a school hallway with higher self-esteem and awareness of self-worth. However, Monáe's performance, when contextualized through black performance history and theory, dance, and popular culture, invites further analysis of moments when movement contributes to healing historical traumas.

Well-known signature moves within black popular music performance are mostly male-dominated and not always choreographed by the performers themselves, despite people often associating or interpreting

the creation of dances with artists who repeatedly make them popular, visible or “put them on the map.”^[59] A notable example is Jackson’s version of the Moonwalk dance^[60] that choreographer Jeffrey Daniel first taught him, which evolved from tap dancer Bill Bailey’s performance of the move he called the “backslide” from the 1943 film *Cabin in the Sky*^[61] and The Electric Boogaloos’ late 70s interpretation of the “backslide.”^[62] Jackson’s performances of the Moonwalk, as well as James Brown’s quick footwork and overall physicality while conducting his backing band, are strongly reminiscent of soul performer Jackie Wilson, and Prince’s splits, turns and jumps also stem from his contemporaries, Brown and Wilson. Despite Wilson’s strong influence on black popular performance, people reductively termed him “the black Elvis.”^[63] Wilson, however, did not take issue with being likened to Presley.^[64] As Presley acknowledged rhythm and blues music as one of his main influences, it’s plausible to summarize the interrelationship between these male performers as one wherein white artists appropriate, interpret, re-circulate, re-introduce within and return these styles to black collective performance culture rather than being the originators. ^[65]

These signature moves, and the struggle for black artists to legally claim their origin as Anthea Kraut describes, embody and signify not only artistic expression, but also black pain and trauma. ^[66] The steps require endurance and physical virtuosity, involving risks that could injure the body with repeated performance and make it more difficult to keep moving or indeed living.^[67] In her lesson, Monáe proudly demonstrates the seemingly straightforward dance, while MistaJam (as well as myself) initially struggle to follow along. Although tricky, the Tightrope dance allows one to move across the floor without jumping onto or off of something, focusing on balance and themes of emotional/physical stability over alternative terrains of risk. Her explanation of the Tightrope dance is inspired by and engages a black performance lineage of masculine-dominated signature moves, while contributing to the tradition of black women performance theorists who describe dance as collective culture. She, along with Yates, helped to revitalize Memphis’s dance culture, as well as foreground black women and queer black bodies within collective movements and the black women performers who document and theorize them. Through her positioning within multiple lineages, Monáe’s performance moves back and forth between appropriation and interpretation, allowing for a complicated yet generative tension akin to Dunham’s practices, as she sings in the lyric “Now put some Voodoo on it.”^[68] In a 2017 interview Lil Buck said that he supported Monáe giving collective credit to the Memphis Jookin’ Community for choreographing the Tightrope dance, since putting Memphis’s jookin’ back on the map emphasized the dance style as part of “Memphis’s identity.”^[69] He added that Yates wanted to choreograph updated “old school” dance styles, along the likes of Brown and Jackson but with more jookin’,^[70] thus the Tightrope dance also functions as a new interpretation—through Yates and Monáe’s subjectivities as black women choreographers and dancers—of jookin’ within a mainstream framework of social and vernacular dance.^[71]

The Tightrope dance, accompanying song, and explanation help to move Monáe and listeners toward expressive improvisation regarding ways of moving and ways of being through or alongside modes of socialized performativity. Further, “Tightrope” is a method and a response to the stresses placed upon black public figures in all realms of American society. At the time of “Tightrope’s” release, Barack Obama was serving as the first black president of the U.S., and Michelle Obama as the first black First Lady. For Monáe, the Obamas represent a huge historical victory that strongly impacted her music.^[72] “Tightrope” references Obama’s much-needed capacities of constant emotional centeredness, regulation, and stability in his presidential role.

In a 2012 interview Monáe stated, “President Obama absolutely inspires me. He’s inspired a lot of my music...I wrote ‘Tightrope’ because it talks about dealing with balance—don’t get too high, don’t get too low—and that’s one of the things that I noticed about President Obama...He stays very centered.” [73]

Monáe performed the song and dance as tribute to the struggles involved with making one’s own way through Sharpe’s “weather,” including traversing to the most powerful leadership position in the US. Michelle Obama, through her speeches and her wellness campaign, also influenced Monáe’s vision of collective awareness and black female strength. Monáe’s aesthetic praxis and the Obamas’ self-representation in the political public sphere met during the 2014 event “Women of Soul: In Performance at the White House,” circulated on PBS, which featured Monáe’s performance of “Tightrope.” While performing, she explained the meaning of the song, including the Obamas’ influence, and her joy in getting to perform at the White House alongside other powerful women in music. She almost entirely focused on singing the lyrics, emphasizing the chorus. Monáe went down into the audience and sang to people individually, incorporating Brown’s lyrics, a form of citation through sound and voice, while also being unapologetically herself. Black public figures, from Hurston, to Monáe, to the Obamas, create and teach methods of survival in the most unreasonable of circumstances through navigating an embodied middle ground—or tippin’ on a tightrope between highs and lows—creating lineages of performers who allow for healing through their collective-signature movements.

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[1] MY COMEUP WORLD, “Lil Buck On Getting His First Break Working With Janelle Monáe,” 6:02, posted on Jan. 30, 2017, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/uUv5M7iry8Q>. Monáe brought in Ladia Yates to choreograph, and Yates then contacted Lil Buck and Dr. Rico. They all co-choreographed it together, and both Buck and Yates share the experience of relocating to Memphis at young ages where they both started jookin’.

[2] MTV. “MTV Video Music Awards 2010,” *MTV.com*, Sept., 12, 2010. The music video for “Tightrope” was nominated for the Best Choreography VMA in 2010, crediting the Memphis collective instead of the specific individuals involved.

[3] For more on the cakewalk, see Megan Pugh’s *America Dancing: From the Cakewalk to the Moonwalk* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), Soyica Diggs Colbert’s chapter “Reenacting the Harlem Renaissance” from *In The African American Theatrical Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and Jayna Brown’s *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

[4] For more on the navigation of black bodies through dance, see Brenda D. Gottschild's *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

[5] The Tightrope dance, through Monáe's theory, becomes a rich cultural site for further analysis, for example there's potential for an explicit engagement with queer studies, since her explanation of the dance has intersectional implications along with moments of what José Muñoz calls disidentification, particularly as gender, race and sexuality intersect. For more information, see José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

[6] A.T. Geronimus, "The Weathering Hypothesis and the Health of African-American Women and Infants: Evidence and Speculations," *Ethnicity & Disease* 2 no. 3 (1992).

[7] Linda Villarosa, "Why America's Black Mothers and Babies Are in a Life-or-Death Crisis," *The New York Times*, Apr. 11, 2018.

[8] Christina Sharpe, "The Weather," in *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

[9] Elizabeth Chin, "Dunham Technique: Anthropological Politics of Dancing through Ethnography," in *Katherine Dunham: Recovering an Anthropological Legacy, Choreographing Ethnographic Futures* (Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2014), 84, 91.

[10] Chin, "Dunham Technique," 93.

[11] BBC Radio 1Xtra, "Janelle Monáe teaches MistaJam the Tightrope," 3:40, posted on May 18, 2010, *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/h9VtQWSdXho>. Screenshots by Dana Venerable.

[12] Chin, "Dunham Technique," 81-82, 87.

[13] *Oxford English Dictionary* s.v., "smooth," <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/smooth>.

[14] Chin, "Dunham Technique," 90.

[15] *Ibid.*

[16] For more about Memphis and black cultural production, see Katrina Hazzard-Donald's *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

[17] Chin, "Dunham Technique," 98. "...yanvalou claims an unbroken kinship with African cultural forms and content. This kinship is generational, and just as over generations the faces and stories of a human family change while remaining part of that family, so the dances change over generations as well. Like the families that carry them, the dances have moved across oceans and many centuries."

[18] *Ibid.*, 86, 98-99. Chin explains that Dunham Technique "is designed to inculcate in dancers a set of

principles that have everything to do with persevering in impossible circumstances. As a form of resistance, the technique accurately diagnoses problems and discourses of power about race, about bodies, about anthropology, and about social theory.”

[19] Library of Congress, “Katherine Dunham on the Circle of Energy,” Video Clip #40, 1:14, posted on September 2002, <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihis.200003847/>

[20] Chin, “Dunham Technique,” 90-91. “When somebody sees you, sees you dance, sees you dance well, you can remove from them many of their anxieties, their doubts, their feelings of being earthbound—any number of things can be removed. So dance, but for heaven’s sake do it with everything in you, mind, body, and spirit. Don’t ever think just of your body.”

[22] Soyica Diggs Colbert, *Black Movements: Performance and Cultural Politics* (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2017), 23.

[23] Alternative texts that discuss the significant connections between black embodiment, movement, flight, and liberation include *EmBODYing Liberation: The Black Body in American Dance* (Piscataway: LIT Verlag, 2001); Anthea Kraut's “Re-scripting Origins: Zora Neale Hurston’s Staging of Black Vernacular Dance,” 59-78; Dorothea Fischer-Hornung's “The Body Possessed: Katherine Dunham Dance Technique in Mambo,” 91-112; Alison Goeller's “(Re) Crossing Borders: The Legacy of Alvin Ailey,” 113-124, and Angela Gittens's “Black Dance and the Fight for Flight: Sabar and the Transformation and Cultural Significance of Dance from West Africa to Black America (1960-2010),” *Journal of Black Studies* 43 no. 1 (2012): 49-71.

[24] Colbert, *Black Movements*, 49-50, 7.

[25] Danielle Goldman, *I Want to be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

[26] Thomas F. DeFrantz and Anita Gonzalez, “From ‘Negro Expression’ to ‘Black Performance,’” in *Black Performance Theory* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2014), 2.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Zora Neale Hurston, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” in *Negro* (1934), 49. “The Negro’s universal mimicry is not so much a thing in itself as an evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama. His words are action words. His interpretation of the English language is in terms of pictures. One act described in terms of another. Hence the rich metaphor and simile.”

[29] Hurston, “Characteristics,” 52.

[30] Ibid., 54. “Everything that he touches becomes angular...Anyone watching Negro dancers will be struck by the same phenomenon. Every posture is another angle. Pleasing, yes. But an effect achieved by the very means which a European strives to avoid.”

[31] Ibid., 55.

[32] Ibid., 56.

[33] Ibid., 55-56. “For example, the performer flexes one knee sharply, assumes a ferocious face mask, thrusts the upper part of the body forward with clenched fists, elbows taut as in hard running or grasping a thrusting blade. That is all. But the spectator himself adds the picture of ferocious assault, hears the drums and finds himself keeping time with the music and tensing himself for the struggle. It is compelling insinuation. That is the very reason the spectator is held so rapt. He is participating in the performance himself—carrying out the suggestions of the performer.” For more on Hurston and dance, see Anthea Kraut’s *Choreographing the Folk: The Dance Stagings of Zora Neale Hurston* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

[34] Ibid., 58.

[35] “Sampling does not take place in a vacuum, and the exchange of dance almost never occurs on an equal playing field. As recent dance scholarship has shown, the history of dance in the United States is also the history of white ‘borrowing’ from racially subjugated communities, almost always without credit or compensation,” Anthea Kraut, *Choreographing Copyright: Race, Gender and Intellectual Property Rights in American Dance* (Oxford University Press, New York, 2015), 4.

[36] Hurston, “Characteristics,” 60.

[37] Ibid., 62-63.

[38] Ibid., 63.

[39] Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 106.

[40] BBC Radio 1Xtra, “Janelle Monae teaches MistaJam the Tightrope.”

[41] Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 15-16.

[42] Goldman, *I Want to be Ready*.

[43] Ibid., 5.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Houston A. Baker, *Turning South Again: Re-Thinking Modernism/Re-Reading Booker T.* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2001).

[46] Ibid., 22.

[47] Colleen Claes, “Janelle Monae: Avant-Garde Film Geek (‘Tightrope’ Video),” *open salon*, Apr. 4, 2010,

https://web.archive.org/web/20120706044921/http://open.salon.com/blog/colleenclaes/2010/04/04/janelle_monae_avant-garde_film_geek_tightrope_video. There’s an interesting connection here, as Deren

worked closely with Dunham early in her career. Judith E. Doneson, “Maya Deren,” in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, Mar. 1, 2009. <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/Deren-Maya>.

[48] Janelle Monáe, “Tightrope [feat. Big Boi] (Video),” 5:12, posted on Mar. 31, 2010, YouTube, <https://youtu.be/pwnefUaKCbc>.

[49] So You Think You Can Dance. “Season Seven, Week Eight.” Fox Broadcasting Company, Aug. 4, 2010. Janelle Monáe, “‘Cold War,’ ‘I Want You Back,’ ‘Tightrope,’” 2011 Nobel Peace Prize Concert, Oslo Spektrum, Oslo, Dec. 11, 2011.

[50] Chin, “Dunham Technique,” 99. People have used her technique for healing purposes, like original Dunham company member Tommy Gomez. Gomez went through two open-heart surgeries and had the bottom half of his right leg amputated in 1993, and the Dunham Technique helped him adjust and move through these obstacles.

[51] *Ibid.*, 81.

[52] *Ibid.*, 84.

[53] *Ibid.*, 84, 91.

[54] Library of Congress, “Katherine Dunham on need for Dunham Technique,” Video Clip #38, 0:40, posted on September 2002. <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200003845/>.

[55] Library of Congress, “Katherine Dunham on Breathing in Dunham Technique,” Video Clip #39, 1:01, posted on September 2002. <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200003846/>.

[56] Sharpe, *In The Wake*.

[57] Chin, “Dunham Technique,” 94. “The yanvalou is a never-ending cycle, and if viewed from a certain perspective, the body-in-yanvalou traces the figure of infinity again and again as the dance is performed. Cosmic cycles of the universe, the snake eating its tail, the circuits of life and death, seasons, love and loss, a rippling wave that holds within itself the potential for a devastating tsunami, the shragging of the earth’s mantle resulting in a cataclysmic earthquake—the yanvalou is all of these and more. And additional circles can be layered onto the ones already described.”

[58] Janelle Monáe. “Tightrope (feat. Big Boi).” Genius. Accessed April 2018. <https://genius.com/Janelle-monae-tightrope-lyrics>.

[59] For more on appropriation of signature steps, see Danielle Robinson’s *Modern Moves: Dancing Race During the Ragtime and Jazz Eras* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), and Susan Manning’s *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

[60] For more on the Moonwalk, see Pugh’s, *America Dancing: From the Cakewalk to the Moonwalk*.

[61] Kostas Kofinas, “The First Moonwalk Onstage! Bill Bailey 1955,” 1:46, posted on Sept. 13, 2017,

YouTube, <https://youtu.be/s3sn0ezbKk8>. *Cabin in the Sky*, Directed by Vincente Minnelli and Busby Berkeley, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1943.

[62] All Things Considered, “‘Bad’ Choreographer Remembers Michael Jackson,” *NPR*, June 26, 2009.

[63] Greg Kot, “Putting the Right Sin on Elvis, Jackie,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 31, 1992.

[64] Ed Masley, “It’s Good To Be King,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, August 15, 2002.

[65] Ed Masley, “Elvis may have been the king, but was he first?” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, July 4, 2004.

[67] This is true regarding Prince’s hip and joint injuries: “...Repetitive extreme or high impact actions are likely to cause injury when executed by anyone during the ongoing practice of dance or athletics. Especially without a careful regimen of strength training and warm-ups, as hips are the main axis of all leg movement, they can place intolerable stress on the joints, often resulting in osteoarthritis...” Carla Blank, “Prince: Pain and Dance,” in *CounterPunch*, May 6, 2016.

[68] Janelle Monáe. “Tightrope (feat. Big Boi).” Genius. Accessed April 2018.
<https://genius.com/Janelle-monae-tightrope-lyrics>.

[69] MY COMEUP WORLD, “Lil Buck On Getting His First Break Working With Janelle Monáe.”

[70] Ibid.

[71] For more on vernacular dance, see Marshall and Jean Stearns’s *Jazz Dance: the Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Macmillan, 1968).

[72] Caitlin McDevitt, “Janelle Monae: I’m inspired by Obama,” *Politico*, Feb. 29, 2012.

[73] Ibid.



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Table of Contents:

- "Introduction: Embodied Arts" by Lezlie Cross and Ariel Nereson
- "'Must Be Heavysset': Casting Women, Fat Stigma, and Broadway Bodies" by Ryan Donovan
- "Unruly Reproductions: The Embodied Art of Mimicry in Vaudeville" by Jennifer Schmidt
- "Choreographies of the Great Departure: Building Civic Bodies in the 1914 *Masque of St. Louis*" by Shilarna Stokes

- "Collective Choreography for Weathering Black Experience: Janelle Monáe The Memphis 'Tightrope' Dance" by Dana Venerable

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