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"The Freedom to Express Yourself": The National Park Service and the African Diasporic Roots of Black Dance in New Orleans

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“The Freedom to Express Yourself”
The National Park Service and the African Diasporic Roots of Black Dance in New Orleans

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History
Public History

by

Ariel Denise Roy

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Project Abstract

In partnership with the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, my project entitled “African Dance in New Orleans: The Roots of Black New Orleans Dance” exhibit will focus on the African diasporic roots of Black traditional dance practices within New Orleans’ African American community. This project aims to diversify the public and political expressions of Black dance in New Orleans. It argues that the study of dance forms and practices uncovers narratives and fragments of African and African American cultural history in New Orleans that are impossible to glean from other sources. This thesis will support three modes of African diaspora dance retentions and cultural practices expressed in New Orleans’ dance communities. With the help of oral histories from African Dance and Drum companies, Black Masking Indians, social aid and pleasure club members, and participants from New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park artist-in-residence musicians. As an exhibit, my project will support the historical narrative of African dance and African cultural continuity in New Orleans through the National Park Service. As an ongoing public history project, this project will support the current efforts to understand African cultural practices in Black New Orleans dance.

Key terms: African dance, African cultural retentions, Africanisms, African diaspora, Black New Orleans dance, cross-cultural communication, cultural practices

Introduction

On Saturdays, Luther ‘Baba Luther’ Gray and Jamilah ‘Mama Jamilah’ Peters-Muhammad, co-founders of the Congo Square Preservation Society, along with Matt Hampsey, supervisor of the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park (JELA) and New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park (JAZZ), started the African Drum Circle program. The program is held on Saturdays and is open to the public to learn more and understand the cultures of West and Central Africa to New Orleans culture. Matt, Baba Luther, and Mama Jamilah decided to mirror the drum circles that would have happened at Congo Square to promote the park's mission of understanding the origins of jazz music. The drum circle program demonstrates the unique rhythms and music of the African diaspora through oral traditions, dancing, and singing.

This thesis explores the African diasporic roots of Black New Orleans dance culture as the subject of interpretive programming for the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park (JAZZ NHP) through the National Park Service. Without understanding these dance practices—as both public and political expression—the public has an incomplete understanding of the long history of Black New Orleanians’ civil rights struggles which began during slavery. Through oral histories and visual performances, the New Orleans Jazz NHP will enhance public knowledge of Black New Orleans dance culture and its social and political significance, past and present. I define Black New Orleans dance to include the African diasporic cultures and practices expressed in New Orleans¹. My primary focus centers around the three modes of Black dance presented by the New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park (JAZZ). For JAZZ, by including the roots and cultural practices of Black New Orleans dance, will incorporate dance’s role in the

¹The usage of the term African dance throughout the thesis will compose of African-based dance retentions in Black New Orleans dance. Using African dance to describe Black dance in New Orleans omits the influences from the Americas and suggests a continental African culture. This paper uses African dance interchangeably.

New Orleans Black communities. Like understanding folkways, religion, foodways, and music in the New Orleans African American community, this project aims to bring Black dance as a form of interpretation. Understanding Black New Orleans dance is essential to the National Park Service because of its influence on African American communities. The three primary modes of Black New Orleans dance are the historical narrative of Congo Square, the study of traditional African and Afro-Caribbean dance and drum (usually performed by African dance institutions), and the Black cultural practices of New Orleans that consist of second line street parades, Black Masking Indians, and African diasporic spirituality. The roots of African diaspora dance in New Orleans encompass a call-and-response form, polyrhythmic and circular movement, music-making, flexed body, secular and religious communication, and rhythms of diasporic cross-cultural dialogue.

As an interpretation piece on African dance in New Orleans, this thesis project is supported by the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park to complement the cultural and musical history of New Orleans (both Parks are housed in the same location). The purpose of Jean Lafitte (JELA) and New Orleans Jazz (JAZZ) is to protect, preserve, and promote the musical and cultural foundations of New Orleans and South Louisiana. New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park has often partnered with local African drum and dance companies for interpretative programming on music, drumming, and dance. Due to their proximity to Black New Orleans culture, this project sought out these institutions as experts on dance in Africa and the African diaspora as interview subjects. These were not the only subjects explored; the inclusion of members from Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, Black Masking Indians, and traditional Afro-Louisiana religious practitioners were also interviewed. The purpose of the oral history project is to document and interpret the African Atlantic and

Afro-Caribbean roots of Black New Orleans dance through the relationships with local New Orleans cultural institutions for the National Park Service. Videos from the recorded interviews will be temporarily housed in the French Quarter Visitor Center theatre and available on the National Park Service website. While not central to the project, the roots of New Orleans jazz can be traced to the dance and drum rhythms of the African Atlantic and the Caribbean.

Since 2017, the National Park Service has been undergoing a shift in its interpretative programming of African American Civil Rights. The original period of African American Civil Rights study was to culminate the properties, facilities, and interpretative programs leading to the evolution of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.² The National Park Service has recently expanded the Civil Rights network to include slavery, the Post-Civil War era, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow. Effectively, one cannot discuss the advent of the African diasporic roots of Black dance in New Orleans without understanding civil rights and political expressions. In response to the shift in programming, I plan to expand the contributions of JAZZ to include music, dance, and culture in African American Civil Rights.

To find visible evidence of African dance in New Orleans, I conducted video and audio interviews with local African dance and drum institutions and their dancers, Social Aid and Pleasure Club members, and Mardi Gras Indians. The interviewees will help build better relationships with the National Park Service through their services to the interpretation of Black dance in New Orleans. These videos will discuss the larger role of African diasporic dance retentions within the National Park Service history and oral history program³. Within the Jean

² "African American Civil Rights Network" <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/civilrights/african-american-civil-rights-network.htm> Accessed date, April 14, 2023.

³ I use African retentions to describe deliberate actions by the interview participants to preserve African and African diaspora identity in Black New Orleans dance. Outside the interviews, I refer to the continuity of African

Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve and New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, this project will also interpret African-based musical continuity throughout Southeast Louisiana. After the initial videos of the participants and performance are completed, the videos will be housed on the National Park Service website and serve as a temporary exhibit that supports the African Drum Circle weekly programming.

Members of institutions such as Black Masking Indians or Mardi Gras Indians and social aid and pleasure clubs have often discussed the African origins of these traditional practices. They also carry within them the traditional mutual aid societies present since the late 1700s in the city's African American community. Afro-diasporic religions like Voodoo and Orisha worship have communities in New Orleans that often incorporate music, dance, and drum in their ceremonies. Local dancers and drummers have founded African drum and dance companies to educate the public. This project supports how African dance has been practiced within the Black community of New Orleans through cultural practices. Oral traditions and histories have been passed down through generations and societies.

I wanted to better understand dance and the Black community in New Orleans in the context of New Orleans Jazz Park's African drum circle events and how the study of African dance practices and extensions has been interpreted through their work. The park employs local drummers, sometimes dancers, monthly for the public to learn about African rhythms and the musical connections between New Orleans and West Africa. The program is like Congo Square's regular Sunday drum circles, where local drummers play at Congo Square in reminiscence of the pre-Civil War era when enslaved and free people of African descent went.

and African diasporic dance in New Orleans as cultural practices. Black New Orleans dance observes traditional dance practices by the African American community.

To understand why the cultural practices of African dance exist in New Orleans today, one must look towards Congo Square. Originally, Congo Square was an open space or festival space where the indigenous population native to the area gathered and sold goods.⁴ Under the first French colonial rule (1718-1762), the Code Noir of 1724 “constituted an attempt by French officials to control the lives of Europeans and enslaved Africans.”⁵ The French and Spanish variations of the codes stated that enslaved persons of color were permitted to be inactive in forced labor on Sundays, to be taught in the Catholic faith, and the right to manumission from one’s owner under Louisiana regulations. On Sundays, enslaved and free people of color used the time to congregate in open public spaces to sell goods, play games and music, and dance. The tradition continued well into the Spanish period (1763-1801). The Spanish imported more Africans into New Orleans as Congo Square grew. During the American period, Congo Square became the only public space where enslaved and free people of color could congregate into large groups and continue to dance and drum under government supervision. Public gatherings and drumming at Congo Square continued until 1861. However, the ceasing of drums did not stop Black New Orleanians from observing the memory.

Freddi Williams Evans, author of *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans*, argues that “visual source materials are not available to accurately trace the evolution of African American dances in the United States during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries.”⁶ According to Jacqui Malone, author of *Stepping on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance*, the grammar of dance practices has carried forth the African roots of African American culture,

⁴Freddi Williams Evans. *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans*. University of Lafayette Press, Lafayette, LA, 2011

⁵Michael T. Pasquier. “The Code Noir of Louisiana” <https://64parishes.org/entry/code-noir-of-louisiana> Accessed date, April 3, 2022.

⁶Evans. *Congo Square*. 89

since certain “movement patterns, gestures, attitudes, and stylizations present in the body language of contemporary Black Americans are proof of African diasporic influences.⁷ Malone continues by including Atlantic African patterns of mutual aid, economic cooperation, and the African worldview that life must have a proper ending.⁸ While this paper will not focus solely on Black Masking Indians and second lines, I will discuss the roots of performative dancing within the two. Public displays of Black dance survived and thrived through Reconstruction, the Jim Crow era, and the Civil Rights Movement under racial and gendered oppression. Often practiced in isolation because of racism, African cultural patterns of dance culture remained indestructible in part due to organizations dedicated to preserving Black New Orleans and African-descended legacies. Most dance traditions are passed orally and performatively, often through generations of performers and native New Orleanians.

Presently, African diasporic dance manifests itself in second lines, Black Masking Indians and performers, and local African dance companies who, in turn, serve as a cultural bridge in the preservation and reinterpretation of dances.⁹ The legacy of African American performative dance culture in New Orleans survived due to culture bearers, and they are the people who uphold the city’s traditions, values, and history. There is also a strong presence of New Orleans Voodoo folk still presiding over the city where Voodoo beliefs manifest themselves in dance, i.e., the Voodoo religion and Orisha mythology of Shango, Elegba, and Oshun. In addition to the cross-cultural communication and migration of African and Caribbean immigrants from the

⁷ Jacqui Malone *Steppin’ on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance*. (University of Illinois Press, Urbana-Chicago, 1996) 24

⁸ Malone. *Steppin on the Blues*. 167

⁹ Burt Feintuch. *Talking New Orleans Music: Crescent City Musicians Talk about Their Lives, Their Music, and Their City*. (University Press of Mississippi. Jackson. 2015)

Democratic Republic of the Congo, Nigeria, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Cuba, and Haiti within New Orleans, who bring their respective dance and drum cultures.

Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's work, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Develvement of Afro-Creole Culture*, demonstrates the precise geographical origins of cultural practices in New Orleans, focusing as she does on the dominant African principal regions around Atlantic Africa, Senegambia, Bight of Benin, and the Kongo-Angola. These three regions are also dominant in Cuba and Haiti, where there are similarities between Afro-Caribbean dances in New Orleans dance.¹⁰ New Orleans strongly resembles the Caribbean in racial demographics, architecture, cuisine, and music dating back to the colonial period.¹¹ Due to the steady presence and arrival of Haitian, Cuban, and other Caribbean migrants, Black dance in New Orleans originates in the Caribbean. Dance is considered a rite of passage, a community builder, and a tradition for the performers, culture bearers, and choreographers. Many dances and performance traditions are practiced by Afro-Caribbean and Atlantic African ethnic cultures in the diaspora's cross-cultural network. The intermixing of dances continued to thrive due to the cultural transmissions among Black people. The dance movement in the Black diaspora has continued to shape traditional and popular dance rhythms. Black dance in New Orleans has been shaped by African-derived rhythms, traditions, and movements, while the global popularity of Black dance in New Orleans has become transnational.

¹⁰ Kim Marie Vaz. *The Baby Dolls: Breaking the Race and Gender Barriers of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Tradition*. (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 2013.) 36-37

¹¹ Cecile Viddal. *Caribbean New Orleans: Empire, Race, and the Making of a Slave Society*. (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2019). After 1731, the direct line between the slave ports of West Africa to Louisiana was shrinking due to financial mismanagement; the Company of the Indies sought demographics from the Caribbean. 50-58.

Historiography

The debates surrounding the usage of Africanism and African cultural retentions have continued to define the study of African American culture since slavery in the Americas. “The study of Africanisms is tied to the study of African American history and more directly to the study of the creolization of African diaspora cultures, which is the essence of African American culture,” writes Brian Joyner from the National Park Service definition of Africanisms.¹²

Africanism proponents such as Melville Herskovits and Joseph Holloway promote innate African survivals that did not disappear upon the expansion of American slavery. J. Lorand Matory, in *Black Atlantic Religion*, observes an African diasporic dialogue around the Atlantic perimeter of predominately Black cultures.¹³ Matory’s argument states that “lifeways, traditions, and social boundaries of African diasporic culture(s) promoted translocal or cross-cultural dialogues due to their environments.”¹⁴ Similar arguments to Matory’s address the language direct retentions and practices from Atlantic Africa are often misleading. Incorporating the circular or triangular cultural network systems of African-descended cultural practices in predominately Black cultures is critical.

This section reviews the literature on African cultural retentions, African dance, African American dance, and Black New Orleans traditional practices related to understanding the cross-cultural connections and roots of Black dance in New Orleans. Similar theses and dissertations on African cultural retentions or practices in New Orleans argue on the cultural societies in

¹² Brian D. Joyner. “African Reflections on the American Landscape: Identifying and Interpreting Africanisms” Office of Diversity and Special Projects. National Park Service. (2003) Accessed date, March 5, 2023 <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/tellingallamericansstories/upload/Africanisms.pdf>

¹³ J. Lorand Matory. *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomble*. (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2005) 13-15.

¹⁴ Matory. *Black Atlantic Religion*. 1-2

which African cultural retentions can place. Shukrani Gray's thesis, "The New Orleans Festival Arts Community: Embodying Culture, Performing Afrocentric Identity," centers around New Orleans Festival Arts practitioners and the intersection of African diasporic identity and the community.¹⁵ Gray explores the Afrocentric community festival traditions that perform African diasporic art daily to promote social change. Gray interviews members from the Black Men of Labor social aid and pleasure clubs, Congo Square Preservation Society founders, and Mardi Gras Indians that employ an Afrocentric identity in their institutions. While Robin Ligon-Williams' "From Maroons to Mardi Gras: The Role of African Cultural Retention in the Development of Black Indian Culture in New Orleans" thesis analyzes African cultural retentions in Mardi Gras Indian culture. Ligon-Williams's thesis is a compilation of interviews and discussions with New Orleans' Black Masking Indian community on their origins and traditions of Mardi Gras Indians. Ligon-Williams observes the oral traditions of the Indian community to the African and maroon origins.¹⁶

Melville Herskovits' argument that slavery did not destroy African culture in the Americas has been proven accurate. Herskovits defines "Africanisms as the continuities, transformations, adaptations, and re-inventions of African culture found within the African diaspora in the Americas since the era of the trans-Atlantic slave trade."¹⁷ Herskovits was one of the first anthropologists to dispel the myths surrounding the roots of African American culture. He argues that although small but visible, enslaved Africans brought and carried African traditions.¹⁸ In *The*

¹⁵ Shukrani Keisha Gray. "The New Orleans Festival Arts Community: Embodying Culture, Performing Afrocentric Identity" (2016). *Theses and Dissertations*. 1267.
<https://dc.uwm.edu/etd/1267>

¹⁶ Robin Ligon Williams. "From Maroons to Mardi Gras: The Role of African Cultural Retention in the Development of the Black Indian Culture of New Orleans" (2018). *Masters Theses*. 480.
<https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/masters/480>

¹⁷ Melville Jean Herskovits. *The Myth of the Negro Past*. 2nd edition. (Beacon Press, Boston, 1900)

¹⁸ Herskovits. *The Myth of the Negro Past*. 3-5

Myth of the Negro Past, he explains that these Africanisms became acculturated through language and the arts as well as secular and religious life. One of the visible ‘Africanisms’ in North America is found in New Orleans through the religion and practice of Voodoo. Joseph Holloway’s *Africanisms in American Culture* interprets how African American cultural practices have been readapted to conditions relating to the Americas under slavery, discrimination, and forced labor. In his essay, “What Africa was given America: African Continuities in the North American diaspora,” of the many variations of African-derived practices, a section discusses the African-derived dances from folk traditions of early Africans in North America to secular African American dances. Kodi Roberts’ *Voodoo and Power: The Politics of Religion in New Orleans, 1881-1940* understands “Voodoo as an aspect of African American folk culture.”¹⁹ While Roberts argues against the racialization and criminalization of Voodoo in New Orleans, he situates Voodoo as a religion that constantly recreates itself to a rapidly changing city by looking first-hand at former Voodoo practitioners and the cult of Marie Laveau (senior).²⁰ African American cultural practices such as Voodoo are amalgamated to respond to such environments.

Sterling Stuckey’s *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory & the Foundations of Black America* traces traditional African practices onto early African American society and culture. The slave ship, where Yorubas, Akans, Ibos, Angolans, and other ethnicities were grouped on ships and experienced a common horror. Enslavers often forced newly captured enslaved Africans aboard ships to dance for exercise or cruel entertainment. However, the dancing element continued amongst enslaved Africans despite restrictive practices from their enslavers. While enslavers in

¹⁹ Kodi Roberts. *Voodoo and Power: The Politics of Religion in New Orleans, 1881-1940*. (Louisiana University Press, Baton Rouge, 2015). “Introduction: Voodoo as American Culture”

²⁰ Marie Laveau, born September 10, 1801, and died June 15, 1881, was a renowned Voodoo priestess. Not to be confused with her daughter, also named Marie Laveau. The elder Laveau is known for holding Voodoo ceremonies near Bayou St. John.

the Americas often forced enslaved Africans to dance for their entertainment, this did not stop Africans in the Americas from integrating with the enslaver's culture. Instead, dancing became one of the many African-based continuities that developed as a response to creating an identity. Stuckey continues to reinforce traditional African spiritual practices within colonial America. Stuckey observes and compares the traditional practices from Dahomey (Benin), Ibos, Yorubas, Kongos, and Akans and how each culture syncretized into shaping African American identity.

Throughout Atlantic Africa, circle dances are common. The circle is linked to the burial ceremony, the most important of all African ceremonies.²¹ Among the Bakongo and in Southern Nigeria, burial ceremonies danced in a counterclockwise circle. Dancing at said ceremonies indicated spirit possession, allowing entrance from the gods to allow one's body to move. In the United States, the counterclockwise dance is called the ring shout—the tempo and revolution of the circle quicken during movement.

Rhythms of African-derived dances flourished in the United States, and the basis of African dance movements often allows for change, says Marshall Stearns in his book *Jazz Dance*.²² The African American social and vernacular dance forms contain many of these properties. He writes,

“African style is often flat-footed and favors gliding, dragging, or shuffling steps. (2) African dance is frequently performed from a crouch, knees flexed, and body bent at the waist. (3) African dance generally imitates animals in realistic detail. (4) African dance also places great importance upon improvisation, satirical and otherwise, allowing freedom for individual expression, (5) African dance is polyrhythmic, centrifugal, exploding

²¹ Sterling Stuckey. *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*. (Oxford University Press. New York. 1987.) 10. The 'shout' could be an Arabic derivation of *saut*, meant to run and walk around the Kaaba, a place of worship.

²² Marshall Stearns, Jean Stearns. *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance*. (The Macmillan Company, New York, 1968.) 14-15

outward from the hips to the legs. (6) African dance is performed to a propulsive rhythm.”²³

In Louisiana, heterogeneous West African nations brought from Senegambia developed an Afro-Louisiana Creole culture. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall argued that the “Bambara culture in Louisiana played a preponderant role in the French colony Afro-creole culture.”²⁴ The Senegambian region of human, materials, and goods exports became heavily sought after by French colonial Louisiana enterprises. Michael Gomez echoes Hall’s research on the Bambara culture in French Louisiana as a tightly knit nuclear community rarely disrupted by the expanding transatlantic slave trade.²⁵ The Bambara cultural survivals in Louisiana have been attributed to the formation of Louisiana Creole languages. In *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, Gomez explores the role of space and cultural interaction Blacks and whites played in developing Black identity. Gomez analyzes that enslaved people concentrated primarily in the South provided opportunities for inter-African cultural exchange.²⁶ The close interaction among people of African descent to share diverse cultures leads us to the role of Congo Square.

By the pre-Civil War period, the site of Congo Square was already etched into public memory. In the Spanish period, Congo Square attracted intense scrutiny and constant supervision. However, because of the site’s famed location, the dances performed there drew in crowds and travelers to document. It is important to note that Congo Square was not the only place where people of African descent were. They danced in dance halls, backyards, bars, and

²³ Stearns. *Jazz Dance*. 14-15

²⁴ Hall. *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*. 41-54

²⁵ Michael Gomez. *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*. (The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1998) 51

²⁶ The continuation of slavery within the Southern United States and the further imports of enslaved Africans and people of African descent developed a steady population of slave communities.

along the levees. Congo Square, in comparison, developed a space large enough to accompany many dancers, musicians, sellers, buyers, and attendants.

Published in 1995, Jerah Johnson, then professor of History at the University of New Orleans, wrote on Congo Square as a Louisiana landmark that served more than enslaved and free people of African descent dancing and drumming. His work *Congo Square in New Orleans* explores the origins of Congo Square and the historical descriptions of Congo Square's history. While Congo Square garnered more attention, there were other public and private places within the city where enslaved Africans and people of African descent danced.²⁷ Before it was named Congo Square, it was usually called Place des Negres, located in the 'back-of-town' margin of the city just behind the French Quarter. Place des Negres began to take shape as early as the 1730s and late into the 1750s, by the time the New Orleans population reached 2,000.²⁸

Freddi Williams Evans takes the African origins of Congo Square a step further in her work, *Congo Square: African Roots in New Orleans*. The origin of the name 'Congo' could have possibly included other African ethnic groups erroneously labeled Congo. A common origination for African dances was that they took place in isolated locations. To Evans, Congo Square became a compilation of musical, dance, spiritual, and traditions. Evans's description places Congo Square at the forefront of keeping African music and performance culture as a meeting ground to exchange cultures, perform dances, and congregate when given the opportunity on Sundays and Catholic holidays. Along with a chronological order of historical events and

²⁷ Jerah Johnson. *Congo Square in New Orleans*. (The Samuel Wilson, Jr. Publications Fund of the Louisiana Landmarks Society, New Orleans, 1995). The riverfront served from the beginning, and well into the 20th century, as New Orleans' main entrance. There are historical documentations that record enslaved Africans dancing in rings along the riverfront.

²⁸ Johnson. *Congo Square*. 9

ordinances related to Congo Square, Evans portrays the historical place as an important space for celebrations, gatherings, and mourning.

The World that Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square by Ned Sublette introduces the public market of Congo Square as a cultural landmark attributed to the growth of New Orleans. Out of Congo Square, enslaved Africans and free people of African descent revived a cultural memory that gave life to music, dance, and drum folkways. Sublette discusses how people of African descent in New Orleans navigated from French possession (twice), then towards Spanish possession, and later American. Before American acquisition, New Orleans was a vibrant, multicultural city. By law, enslaved people of African descent were given Sundays and Catholic holidays off. On Sundays, enslaved people of African descent were permitted to work away from their enslaver as hired-out labor. Elsewhere, enslaved people navigated to public spaces, including Congo Square, to dance, sing, play music, and sell personal goods. New Orleans' three colonial powers brought a dominant Black African ethnic population, principally Bambara, Kongo-Angola, and Benin, from Africa and enslaved African Americans from the American domestic slave trade.²⁹

Through Kongolese culture, New Orleans shares similarities with Haitian and Cuban cultures. Sublette and Jeroen Dewulf, author of *From the Kingdom of Kongo to Congo Square* write that the largest single African group that arrived in New Orleans was from the Kongo-Angola region. Geographically, they were the strongest African influence on the New World. By no means was Kongo-Angola, the only African group with influence on New Orleans. However, numerous cultural folkways in New Orleans are also found in the Kongo-Angola region. Even

²⁹ Ned Sublette. *The World That Made New Orleans: From Spanish Silver to Congo Square*. (Lawrence Hill Books, Chicago. 2008). 3-5. The domestic slave trade to New Orleans developed into a larger community of enslaved people from Kentucky, the Carolinas, Tennessee, Virginia, Maryland, and Georgia.

the origin of the name Congo Square attributes to Kongo-derived dances that took place such as the Bamboula.

In addition, Congo Square is a place of memory, retention, and performance. The dances performed at Congo Square developed Black New Orleans performances of second lines and Black Masking Indians. Dewulf argues that the Kongo dances and performance culture influenced Black Masking Indians or Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans.³⁰ Dewulf traces Mardi Gras Indian lineage to Portuguese Kongo, with a strong Kongo-Catholic tradition. According to Dewulf, there are similarities between Iberian festive processional tradition during Catholic holidays and traditional Kongo mock war dances and festivals to the development of Mardi Gras Indians. The mock war dance, sangamento had a major influence on the larger Kongolese diaspora.³¹ Sangamento is derived from the Kikongo verb ju-sanga and evokes dancers' spectacular leaps, contortions, and gyrations.³²

Black dance in New Orleans goes beyond Congo Square. Greer Goff Mendy's *Black Dance in Louisiana: Guardian of a Culture* explores Black dance encompassing Louisiana's African American culture, from Zydeco dance in Acadiana, the ring shouts of the Winnsboro Easter Rock Ensemble in Winnsboro, LA, and all-Black sorority dances at the Southern University of New Orleans. *Black Dance in Louisiana* identifies where the Black dance traditions originated from the historical dances that allegedly took place on rural Louisiana plantations or wherever there was an open venue. *Black Dance in Louisiana* stresses that in

³⁰ Jeroen Dewulf. *From the Kingdom of Kongo to Congo Square: Kongo Dances and the Origins of Mardi Gras Indians*. (University of Louisiana at Lafayette Press.) Lafayette. 2017. 7

³¹ Dewulf. *From the Kingdom of Kongo*. 34

³² Dewulf. *From the Kingdom of Kongo*. The movements and gestures of the dance were related to a war technique. The performance of the sangamento was usually accompanied by a band; dancers wore feathered headdresses and belts with jingles and carried axes, spears, and sticks.

Louisiana, Black people have practiced a clear linkage to African traditions. Mendy's work does not criticize Congo Square but stresses the importance of researching and identifying *all* public spaces where Black dance in Louisiana existed.³³ While Mendy's work assumes these traditions are pure African, many popular traditional Black dances have adopted movements and cultures separate from Africa yet retaining similarities.

Lynne Fauley Emery's *Black Dance: from 1619 to Today* observes and documents the origins of African American dance in the United States. Emery notes that dances made popular by African Americans came from the Caribbean. The dances of the Bamboula, Chica, and Calinda were documented particularly in colonial and antebellum New Orleans.³⁴ The Bamboula, Calinda, and Chica dances originated in the Kongo-Angola region, Arada (Benin), and Guinea. The Calinda or Kalenda has variants in Voodoo, mock war dance, mimicry, stick fighting, and intimacy dances. Emery writes, "dancers are arranged in two lines facing each other, the men on one side and the women on the other." The spectators and other dancers form a circle with the drummers.³⁵ Emery continues, "the dancers jump, make swift turns, approach each other at two or three feet, then draw back with the drumbeat."³⁶ The sound of drums brings the men and women together, each providing to slap their thighs, strike their bellies, and then to the opposite sex. Other variations include tapping feet, lifting the heel and toe, and spinning around rapidly.

³³ Greer Mendy. *Black Dance in Louisiana: Guardian of a Culture*. (Tekrema Center for African Diaspora Cultural Literacy, New Orleans, 2017). 10-12

³⁴ Lynne Fauley Emery. *Black Dance: from 1619 to Today*. (Princeton Book Company, Pennington, 1988) 20-21

³⁵ Emery. *Black Dance*. Emery's definition of the Calinda dance is composed of a variety of alleged historical descriptions. The Calinda may also include a variation of a stick fighting dance.

³⁶ Emery. *Black Dance*

Dance amongst African people and people of African descent also occurs through religion, whether indigenous, Catholic, or a combination of both. Robert Farris Thompson has studied African influences on the Americas. His study of Vodun, or Voodoo, argued that Voodoo in the Americas is a blended religion from Yorubaland, Dahomey, and Kongo.³⁷ Dancers pay tribute to the pantheon of syncretized Voodoo spirits or loa, Damballah, Oshun, Shango, Elegba (Papa Legba), Ogun, and Gede.³⁸ African Atlantic religions traversed across the waters into the Americas in Brazil (Candomble), Haiti (Vodou), Jamaica (Obeah), and Cuba (Santeria). Each is a religion of divination, sacrifice, healing, music, dance, and spirit possession. Like spirit possession, the spirits of Voodoo iconography inhabit a host that compels the body to move.

Cultural practices of African dance in New Orleans manifest themselves in Black Masking Indians, jazz funerals, and second lines³⁹. These practices are, according to Sybil Kein, “the essence that’s the continuation of the African/West Indian religious heritage of New Orleans African Americans blended with European Christianity.”⁴⁰ African cultural patterns associated with burial rituals, music, and dance is the formation of social organizations. Commonly known in New Orleans as benevolent societies or mutual aid organizations, these organizations often include brass band musicians as members. Kein explains that the principal festivals of the enslaved were at their burials, and the tradition continued even after the Civil War.

³⁷ Robert Farris Thompson. *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. (Random House Inc. New York, 1984). 164. From the Yoruba and the Fon came the worship of the Vodun pantheon. From the Kongo came the veneration of the dead and ancestors.

³⁸ Many of the Voodoo pantheon have been combined with spirits, gods, and other mythology from across Atlantic Africa.

³⁹ The second line after a jazz funeral consists of the mourners and community that follows the first line. The first line includes the deceased family members, the brass band, and close friends.

⁴⁰ Sybil Kein. “The Celebration of Life in New Orleans Jazz Funerals.” *Revue Française d’études Américaines*, no. 51, 1992, pp. 19–26. Accessed 30 Oct. 2022. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20872233>

One famous sight at Mardi Gras in New Orleans is the Black Masking Indians, more commonly known as Mardi Gras Indians.⁴¹ Black masquerading tradition also originates in Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, and the Caribbean.⁴² Their suits are comprised of intricate beadwork, feathered headdresses, and staff. The members communicated via chants, ritual dances, drums, and music. The history of Black Masking Indians documented in New Orleans came as early as the 1880s, writes Nikesha Williams. In her work, Williams discovers the histories and legends of Black Masking Indians from the Indians' point of view while comparing the stories of masking Indians as written by others such as Dewulf.

The larger African American dance community is not without cultural institutions providing dance instruction. Katherine Dunham and Alvin Ailey are credited with developing modern African American social dance styles with ballet, jazz, tap, African, and African diasporic traditional dances. Katherine Dunham was a dancer, anthropologist, and activist and has been called the “matriarch of Black dance.” The Dunham technique involves merging polyrhythmic dance, such as ballet and jazz, into the fusion of Afro-Caribbean rhythms. In *Island Possessed*, Dunham reveals how her anthropological findings, formal and informal dance education, and her lifelong commitment to the people and traditional cultural practices of Haiti inspired her to be influenced by the complexity and polyrhythmic movements of Black dance. Dunham would later use her techniques in her dance company, the Katherine Dunham Company, now known as the Katherine Dunham Center for Arts and Humanities.

⁴¹ Members of nations prefer to be called Black Masking Indians. Whereas the term Mardi Gras Indians refer the members only appearing during Mardi Gras. Prior to desegregation of Mardi Gras, masking Indians could not parade with ‘white-only’ floats. Masking Indian in turn created their tradition outside of the conventional Mardi Gras traditions amongst Black neighborhoods of New Orleans.

⁴² Nikesha Elise Williams. *Mardi Gras Indians*. (Louisiana University Press. Baton Rouge, 2022.)

African Dance at the Jean Lafitte and New Orleans Jazz Historical Parks

How does understanding African dance in New Orleans fit into the National Park Service?

The roots and foundations of Black dance in New Orleans from African rhythms have been interpreted in the past through the origins of jazz music, but not in full detail. At Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve (JELA) and New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park (JAZZ), there is space to include further documentation on the origins of African American social dance as it relates to the foundation of jazz and documenting the dispersal of African culture in south Louisiana. For JELA, most research on New Orleans' African American culture is done through interpretative programming. The exhibits displayed in the visitor center are on Louisiana Cajun and Creole culture, the arrival of South Louisiana's prominent ethnic groups, and a dialect and musical listening station. While the JAZZ park's operations are housed at JELA French Quarter Visitor, JAZZ interpretation focuses on musical programming. Most musical performances occur in the multipurpose room behind the visitor center, the courtyard, or the New Orleans Jazz Museum, where JAZZ has partnered to host performances on Tuesdays and Thursdays. In addition to programming, further interpretation could discuss the origins of New Orleans jazz from social dance to the origins of social dance from African diasporic rhythms. The project will introduce the similarities of Black dance in the diaspora and New Orleans, what are the foundations, roots, and practices of Black New Orleans dance.

Although most visitors can understand the foundation and history of jazz from the musicians and the interpretative programs on New Orleans' African American cultures, they would better serve the public by having attainable resources to learn more about the culture. This research aims to provide more information on the African retentions of Black New Orleans dance as an interpretation of JELA and JAZZ. As stated in the introduction, the African Drum

Circle has been a staple of the Jazz Park since 2016, held on Saturdays in either the multipurpose room or the courtyard. The premise is to mirror the Sunday drum circle held at Congo Square. Every month, a local drummer would lead visitors in learning the rhythms of African drums, most notably the djembe drum.

The drummers frequently mention that New Orleans musical culture has similarities with Atlantic African cultures. One could argue for the accuracy of how strong Atlantic African culture is in New Orleans. However, the cuisine, dialects, religion, and music of New Orleans bear a strong resemblance to African diasporic cultures. For visitors and the public to understand the history, traditions, and expressions of the musical rhythms found in New Orleans will help the African Drum Circle performances and bring a more excellent representation.

Researching the African retentions or practices of Black New Orleans dance through oral histories and public performances led to seeking out cultural museums and institutions that did similar projects and exhibitions. The National Park Service has developed an interpretation and identified West and Central African cultural contributions as a guideline to increase awareness of various cultural groups' role in shaping the American landscape.⁴³ The National Park Service has developed program resources on conducting oral histories and examples of completed and ongoing oral history projects.⁴⁴ They also use it to broaden our understanding of some of the most important movements in American history, such as immigration, civil rights, and women's rights.⁴⁵ Scores of parks use oral history interviews to document people and events they commemorate and capture individual parks' history. Through the New Orleans Jazz National

⁴³ Joyner. "African Reflections on the American Landscape"

⁴⁴ National Park Service Oral History Program. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/oralhistory/index.htm>

⁴⁵ McDonnell, J. A. 2003. "Documenting cultural and historical memory: oral history in the National Park Service." *The Oral History Review* 30(2): 99–10. Accessed date, February 18, 2023. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/oralhistory/upload/McDonnell-oralhistoryreview.pdf>

Historical Park, the park has explored the roots and foundation of jazz music in New Orleans by highlighting European, American, Caribbean, and Atlantic African influences. This interpretation has helped determine where Black New Orleans dance fits into the jazz narrative. Developing oral histories on the roots of Black New Orleans dance will be an integral part of who the practitioners are and where we can find spaces of Black New Orleans dance.

The New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Archives host a collection of the New Orleans Jazz Festival's Congo Square Stage, previously known as the African Heritage Stage, from 1992 to 2003.⁴⁶ The African Heritage Stage hosted discussion panels, dance, and drum performances from up-and-coming African dance and drum companies, artists, members of social aid and pleasure clubs, and Black Masking Indians, in addition to other topics within the African American community. Topics included demonstrations of urban street dancing, the Bamboula rhythm, second lines, drumming, and African American secret societies. The African Heritage Stage also hosts lectures on Congo Square, the Tremé neighborhood, and African American spirituality.

Public Engagement

In addition to the African Drum Circle, the possible ventures for this project could lead to incorporating African dances into weekly interpretive programming. New Orleans Jazz could invite trained dancers and drummers who would instruct audience members to learn the steps and movements of a dance corresponding to the drums. The local African drum and dance institutions in New Orleans could participate in public performances and lectures hosted by New Orleans Jazz and Jean Lafitte French Quarter Visitor Center. Local dance historians,

⁴⁶ New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Foundation. African Heritage Stage collections.
<https://nojh.saas.dgicloud.com/islandora/object/islandora:2234>

choreographers, and members of social aid and pleasure clubs could lead discussions with the public on the culture of Black dance in New Orleans. Jean Lafitte and New Orleans Jazz each sponsor interpretive programs through outside partnerships and education that could incorporate African dance historians and performers to support their mission.

Finding African Dance in New Orleans

According to Luther ‘Baba Luther’ Gray, he states that New Orleans has over sixteen African nations from the west and central regions that were brought into the city⁴⁷. Beginning in 1791, the Haitian Revolution brought a steady arrival of white Haitian *emigres*, free and enslaved Afro-Haitians, and newly arrived Africans fleeing or migrating to New Orleans that ushered in greater Caribbean culture. The population boom since the 1760s under the Spanish period into the American acquisition resulted in diverse African and African diaspora cultures that have become recognizable worldwide. Historical representations include the Calenda, Bamboula, Voodoo, and Congo dances, recorded by visiting travelers to New Orleans. The domestic slave trade in the United States further placed enslaved African Americans in New Orleans, possibly bringing their cultures and instruments to Congo Square and beyond.⁴⁸ Black dance in New Orleans is part of the global community of Afro-Atlantic dialogues. Dance in the African diaspora exhibits cultural change, exchange, appropriation, and re-appropriation in social, economic, and political spaces where dance can be expressed. The continuation of African and African diasporic social networks also exists within Black mutual aid organizations, traditional

⁴⁷ “Congo Square Clinic with Luther Gray // History of Congo Square.”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohXYUyQGG4U> Accessed date, April 3, 2023

⁴⁸ Evans. *Congo Square*

African dance and drum companies, Black Masking Indians, traditional religions of the African diaspora, and most notably, Congo Square serving as a site of memory.

The relationships between Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, Black Masking Indians, and African diasporic spiritual practices are rooted in socio-cultural membership. Bruce ‘Sunpie’ Barnes, a Black Men of Labor member and the Northside Skull and Bones Gang, addresses the cultural connections of traditional practices in New Orleans. He states to look to the cemeteries whose tombstones hold information about the deceased’s social standing in traditional groups of New Orleans.⁴⁹ Barnes says to look at which membership the person belonged to and if the gravesite had spiritual objects surrounding their memorial, further emphasizing the connections of spirituality to the practices. Many interviewees stressed that the rhythms of Black dance in New Orleans could be found in the footwork of dances performed at street processions and from Black Masking Indians. In turn, these dances relate to the veneration of ancestors traced from Voodoo worship, Afro-Caribbean religions, and African American spirituality.

The relationships between African dance and drum institutions with Black New Orleans cultural practices vary. Some companies exist outside the connections to spirituality and organizations, while others have principal dancers who work with them and are members of these organizations. Their performances emphasize African dance cultures while teaching the public about the African cultural practices of New Orleans cultural practices. The institutions serve as dance practitioners who have studied and performed the origins of Black and African-based dances in New Orleans. In addition, they study the traditional dances of Atlantic Africa and the Caribbean in their public performances and demonstrations. Their founders implore the

⁴⁹ Interview with Bruce ‘Sunpie’ Barnes and Fred Johnson. Interview conducted by Ariel Roy. Nov. 17, 2022

importance of Congo Square's place as a site where Black New Orleanians came to dance during or after their processions, to have 'Indian' battles, to perform their religions, and to celebrate in the form of dance and music.

Congo Square

On any given Sunday, Luther 'Baba Luther' Gray and Dr. Denise Graves of the Congo Square Preservation Society lead a prayer to honor the lives and ancestors that ventured to Congo Square every Sunday to dance, sing, play games, and sell personal goods.⁵⁰ Jamilah 'Mama Jamilah' addresses the consistent continuity of African-based rhythms. She says the rings in Congo Square that housed different African, Caribbean, and Louisiana Creole ethnic groups came together to form multiple rhythms you hear and see in New Orleans music.⁵¹ Baba Luther, Denise Graves, and the drummers continue the drum circle tradition from 3:00 to 6:00 pm. The Congo Square Drum Circle allows African American vendors, spiritual rituals, and dancers to express themselves.⁵² Congo Square's historic space has been reclaimed as a heritage site for freedom of dance, drum, and social expression. The site serves as a memory, or *lieu de souvenir*, a space for remembering the rich, diverse strands of African diaspora identity and practice and overcoming adversity.⁵³ The square, and by extension, the community, continue to be a space for memory that celebrates the diverse traditions of New Orleans' African diaspora.

⁵⁰ Interview with Dr. Denise Graves. August 18, 2022. Phone interview conducted by Ariel Roy.

⁵¹ Interview with Luther Gray and Jamilah Peters-Muhammad. Interview by Ariel Roy and Hunter Miles Davis. June 21, 2022.

⁵² The Congo Square Drum Circle provides space for African American vendors, spiritual rituals, and spontaneous dancers from the community and tourists to experience the memory of Congo Square.

⁵³ Parham, Angel Adams. Chapter 9 "Congo Square as a *Lieu de Souvenir* in New Orleans" *Sweet Spots: In-Between Spaces in New Orleans*, ed. Teresa A. Toulouse and Barbara C. Ewell. (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 2018) 173-181

Post-Civil War, Congo Square continued to be a site for public events and celebrations. While not frequently visited before the Civil War, locals remember Congo Square as where numerous people came to dance and listen to music. The Congo Square Preservation Society annually hosts the Congo Square New World Rhythms Festival, sponsored by the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation. The festival is usually held in late March at Louis Armstrong Park. The event features traditional, modern African, and Afro-Caribbean dances from local African drum and dance companies, workshops on African dance and drumming, an arts and food market, and friendly battles from Mardi Gras Indians. The festival continues the festive traditions of the past that once occurred at Congo Square.

Street Procession/Second Lines

The dances performed during second lines and funeral processions are supposed to guide the deceased spirit's path onto Heaven or the afterlife.⁵⁴ Traditionally, dancing within a second line or street procession has no definitive structure⁵⁵. Once the music starts, you begin to dance in your way. However, there are fundamental movements that are performed in second lines that share similar characteristics to African diasporic rhythms. This section will discuss social organizations' role in forming second lines and street processions, mainly Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs. Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs are similar to mutual aid and benevolent societies that date back to the 1700s in New Orleans.⁵⁶ The organization aims to assist with funeral costs, insurance, and health. These clubs often hold annual street parades around the neighborhoods to

⁵⁴ Malone. *Steppin' on the Blues*. While Black dance in New Orleans shares similar characteristics to African American social dance, Black dance in New Orleans has managed to retain its African rhythms due to the existence of cultural institutions.

⁵⁵ Second lines are defined as groups of people who follow behind the main line of club members, brass band, or societies. The preferred term of second-line dancing is referred to as a street procession.

⁵⁶ Sublette. *The World that Made New Orleans*.

raise awareness of their club's mission and to raise funds for their members. The origins of mutual aid societies in New Orleans can be traced back to the Iberian fraternities and African secret societies.⁵⁷ According to Malone, "from Senegal to Angola, these organizations functioned as powerful agents of social regulation that addressed political, economic, and religious concerns."⁵⁸ Music, song, and dance were essential to their activities, and many held annual festivals that included dances and processions.⁵⁹ In my interview with Fred Johnson, one of the co-founders of the Black Men of Labor Social Aid and Pleasure Club discusses the continuation of social aid and pleasure clubs in New Orleans. Fred says that after the Civil War, formerly enslaved African Americans needed help buying insurance and burying their loved ones, so they started mutual aid organizations. Later, he says, mutual aid organizations became racially diverse, yet African Americans continued to 'take care of their own.'⁶⁰ Fred concludes that the mutual aid organizations evolved into benevolent societies and pleasure clubs as times changed, yet still holding on to African retentions. Fred's definition of social aid and pleasure clubs holding onto African continuity bears similarity to Cuba's *cabildos de nacion*. In Cuba, *cabildos de nacion* were African ethnic fraternal organizations as mutual aid societies and entertainment for the enslaved population. *Cabildos* existed until Cuban officials started to crack down on their public celebrations. Ned Sublette explained in *The World That Made New Orleans that Afro-Cubans* involved in *cabildos* practiced their respective ethnic African dances, music, and drumming in these organizations.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Dewulf. *From the Kingdom of Kongo*. The Afro-Iberian presence within the Kongo Empire and the Americas resembles Portuguese and Spanish Catholic fraternal organizations that became a society to retain Afro-Catholic rituals.

⁵⁸ Malone. *Steppin' on the Blues*. 169

⁵⁹ Malone. *Steppin' on the Blues*. 169

⁶⁰ Interview with Fred Johnson and Bruce 'Sunpie' Barnes by Ariel Roy. Nov. 17, 2022

⁶¹ Sublette. *The World That Made New Orleans*.

By the early 1860s in New Orleans, social aid and benevolent societies were integral to the Black community. Many of these organizations hired brass bands to play for funerals, dances, annual parades, and other club-related activities. The origins of dancing at second lines and street processions come from African-based religions and African processional traditions.⁶² Other origins include the movements in a second line that transitioned from the ring circle dance to a line that members could follow.⁶³ Historically, second lines were considered a funeral dance procession, where dancers stomped their feet, jumped, did leaps, and twisted in the air, incorporating the crossing of their feet and legs. Later, the second line would come to be known as street parades for secular occasions. New Orleans street processions are similar to Haiti's *rara* bands and Cuban *comparsas* during the Carnival season⁶⁴. The similarities show a connection between the circum-African diasporic festival traditions.⁶⁵

Mardi Gras Indians

Black Masking Indians, also known as Mardi Gras Indians, are African American men and women who form groups known as tribes that gained popularity around the late 1880s. The rhythms of the Black Masking Indians have their origins in Atlantic Africa, the Caribbean, Louisiana maroons, and indigenous Americans. Transcriptions of masking Indians have been around since the 1800s, possibly earlier.⁶⁶ Mardi Gras Indians have processions and appearances

⁶² Kein. "The Celebration of Life in New Orleans Jazz Funerals" It is theorized that the circular African-based dances evolved to line dances. Today, Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs who hold street processions, stop to form a circle to dance around the group and the younger members.

⁶³ Kein. "The Celebration of Life in New Orleans Jazz Funerals" The origin that the second line transitioned to a line denotes members of a community walking and dancing to the cemetery. Previously, second-liners or dancers would form a circle around the deceased member's family. Also called the ring shout, buck-jumping. 24

⁶⁴ Grete Viddal. "Haitian Migration and Danced Identity in Eastern Cuba." *In Making Caribbean Dance: Continuity and Creativity in Island Cultures*. 2010. 92-3

⁶⁵ Walker, Daniel E. "El Día de Reyes and Congo Square: Links to Africa and the Americas." *No More, No More: Slavery and Cultural Resistance in Havana and New Orleans*, NED-New edition, University of Minnesota Press, 2004, pp. 1–18. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttsm5m.4>. Accessed date, Nov. 1, 2022. 2-5.

⁶⁶ Dewulf. *From the Kingdom of Kongo*. 42

in New Orleans starting on Mardi Gras Day and other occasions such as Indian gatherings, practices, second-line parades, and their annual gatherings following St. Joseph's Day, celebrated as Super Sunday in various New Orleans neighborhoods. In a series of musical cultures of the Gulf South, Tulane University developed guides on Mardi Gras Indian culture. According to Ben Sandmel, Mardi Gras Indians, "they strut, chant, play drums and other percussions, and engage in ritualized mock battles with other tribes."⁶⁷ In their processions, the careful and delicate hand-sewn suits often fashion with fanciful depictions of indigenous American battles and figures, African and family or kinship histories. While wearing one and parading in it is known as "masking Indian." Sandmel notes, "on some levels, these tribes function as neighborhood social clubs, yet they also have a serious cultural mission."⁶⁸

In an interview with the Historic New Orleans Collection, the late Bo Dollis Sr., Big Chief of the Wild Magnolias, spoke on dances performed by Indians. Dollis Sr. recalls Indians dancing particularly on the night of St. Joseph's Day or the St. Joseph's Day Parade.⁶⁹ Nowadays, Mardi Gras Indians do not perform dances as they have done so in the past. Dollis Sr. theorizes that the suits have become heavier, limiting their dancing as vigorous dances could damage their suits. George Lipsitz explores New Orleans carnival culture; he writes that dancing offers an opportunity to display one's suit.⁷⁰ Dancing continues to take on the symbolic expression of combat between two tribes. With their elaborate suits, headgear, staffs, and shields, what is the importance of dances performed by the Indians?

⁶⁷ Ben Sandmel. "Mardi Gras Indians". Music Rising at Tulane. The Musical Cultures of the Gulf South. <https://musicrising.tulane.edu/discover/themes/mardi-gras-indians/> Accessed date, April 3, 2023.

⁶⁸ Sandmel. "Mardi Gras Indians"

⁶⁹ "Big Chief Bo Dollis on Mardi Gras Indian Dancing" The Historic New Orleans Collection. Interviewed by Michael P. Smith. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jutkvExau4>

⁷⁰ George Lipsitz. "Mardi Gras Indians: Carnival and Counter-Narrative in Black New Orleans." *Cultural Critique*, no. 10, 1988, pp. 99–121. Accessed 30 Oct. 2022. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354109>.

Historical accounts of Black Masking Indians describe African American men dressed in Native American headdresses, bells, tails, and feathered clothing during Carnival season.⁷¹ In 1817, Swiss visitor Johann Buechler described male dancers “in oriental and Indian dress with a Turkish turban of various colors with cloths of the same sort around their body to cover their nakedness.”⁷² Other accounts include a gathering outside the city near Lake Pontchartrain where enslaved and free nations had their flags as a rallying point to dance.⁷³ While the tradition of dances done by Black Masking Indians has lessened, as Bo Dollis Sr. mentioned, the inclusion of music, song, chanting, and dance has remained strong within the Indian community.

Voodoo/Spirituality

The African Atlantic traditional religions of Vodun, Orishas (Yoruba), and Kikongo are prominent belief systems in the Americas. New Orleans shares many parallel cultures to the West Indies; the African diaspora religions of Voodoo or Vodou and the Orishas have evolved similarly. However, the Yoruba mythology of the Orishas developed alongside Voodoo or Vodou in the diaspora. Under the Catholic faith, these religions could disguise their spirits and gods within Catholic iconography and likeness.⁷⁴ African diasporic network of traditional religions in New Orleans arrived upon the continuous arrival of enslaved Africans and their descendants.⁷⁵ Louisiana Voodoo continues to be an important religious practice among the

⁷¹ Dewulf. *From the Kingdom of Kongo*.

⁷² Williams. *Mardi Gras Indians*. 39

⁷³ Williams. *Mardi Gras Indians*. In 1831, Pierre Forrest recounted a site where various ‘African’ and ‘Creole’ groups meet at ‘The Camp’ near Lake Pontchartrain. He described the scene as a huge green field on the bank of the lake. Each group had its flag that stood tall. They danced with extraordinary speed. 38-9

⁷⁴ Fromont, Cecile. *Afro-Catholic Festivals in the Americas: performance, representations, and the making of Black Atlantic tradition*. Edited. (Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 2019)

⁷⁵ Religious networks of the African Atlantic consist of Islam, Christianity, traditional African religions, and non-religious beliefs. Islam and traditional African religions dominated the Senegambian regions of the Serer, Wolof, Mande, and Fulbe. Vodun dominated the Ewe, Fon, and Aja peoples. Catholicism was heavily concentrated in the Kongo-Angola region. Among the Yoruba consist of the belief in the Orishas.

practitioners in New Orleans. Variations of Voodoo spirit worship exist in Black New Orleans dance through second lines and Black Masking Indians.⁷⁶ In the interview with Voodoo Queen Kalindah Laveaux, she explained that Voodoo dances are not a misnomer. The dance or possession often can take form in the Voodoo spirit. Dance in Voodoo is not an isolated study but a part of the culture of music, song, and spiritual belief.⁷⁷ Kalindah mentions that Voodoo in Louisiana is an integral part of everyday life in how one cleans their house, washes their clothes, hair styling, and traditions.⁷⁸ Louisiana Voodoo has religious elements from the Ewe, Fon, and Kongo nations of spirit worship, religious talismans, and deities that govern the forces of nature. Other Afro-Louisiana traditional religions include variations of Orisha worship, presumably populated by Haitian and Cuban migrants. In a separate interview with Andrea Peoples, who performs Afro-Cuban and Orisha dances with her company KAC Nola discusses how Orisha dances are a sign of respect to the Orisha pantheon.⁷⁹ Peoples mentioned that New Orleans has a Latin dance community of Cuban, Honduran, and Mexican influences.

The dances that honor the Voodoo spirits and Orisha gods can be traced through African and Afro-Caribbean spirituality. Cultural practices of African and Afro-Caribbean spiritual dances are seen in jazz funerals and Black Masking Indians. Remembering that after the body has been to rest, the mourners rejoice. The dancers are compelled by spirit possession to dance so that the deceased's spirit can pass on peacefully. The dances are also meant to honor the 'spirits,' so they won't be vengeful towards the mourners. Big Chief Victor Harris of the Spirit of Fi-Yi-Yi recalls

⁷⁶ Turner. *Jazz Religion, the Second Line, and Black New Orleans*. Zora Neale Hurston's research and religious experience studying the connection between Haitian Vodou and Voodoo in New Orleans and its relation to the religious domain of second-line culture. 38. Jason Berry. "African Cultural Memory in New Orleans Music." Emphasis the masking Indian was a performance strategy related to the spirit world of Vodou, for masks were spirit faces of the ancestors, of deities. 54

⁷⁷ Interview with Voodoo Queen Kalindah Laveaux by Ariel Roy. December 18, 2022.

⁷⁸ Interview with Voodoo Queen Kalindah Laveaux by Ariel Roy. December 18, 2022

⁷⁹ Interview with Andrea Peoples by Ariel Roy. August 9, 2022

that the role of a masking Indian is to embody the spirit through masking [the spirit is expressed in song, dance, and drums].⁸⁰ Big Queen Ausetua Amor Amenkum of the Washitaw Nation details the positions of the Mardi Gras Indians to the Orisha pantheon. In our interview, she explains that the Big Chief is Shango, the king; the Big Queen is Oshun, Shango's queen; the Wild Man is Elegua, the god of crossroads; the Flag Boy is Orunmila, the scribe, and the Medicine Man is Ogun, the god of ironworks.⁸¹ While we cannot accurately decipher the Mardi Gras Indian symbolism to the Orishas, there are traditional Mardi Gras Indian songs that honor Shango, "Xango Mongo Lo Ha!"⁸² Along with nations, religion was the locus in maintaining elements of African culture.⁸³

African American Dance and Drum Companies

Local African dance and drum institutions in New Orleans inhabit a unique Black New Orleans dance scene. These traditional African dance and drum companies have been around since the late 1980s and the early 1990s; later, modern African dance companies were created from the foundation of traditional African dance and drum. The 1980s and 1990s brought forth Afrocentrism and a personal connection back to Africa. Not only in New Orleans but numerous African dance and drum companies were also developed during this time to develop teachings on the nature of African dance. Companies took inspiration from early African American dance institutions like Alvin Ailey, Katherine Dunham, and Lula Elzy to combine African American social dance rhythms into popular dance forms. Local companies and organizations in New

⁸⁰ Breulin, Rachel. Victor Harris. *Fire in the Hole: The Spirt Work of Fi-Yi-Yi & Mandingo Warriors*. (University of New Orleans Press, New Orleans, 2018). 9-11

⁸¹ Interview with Ausetua Amor Amenkum by Ariel Roy. August 13, 2022.

⁸² Turner, Richard Brent. *Jazz Religion*. 108. Xango is the alternate spelling for Shango.

⁸³ Thornton. *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World*. Since the 16th century, African religious and aesthetic (music and dance especially) ideas were displayed in gatherings of people from the same nation. 320

Orleans have invited drummers, dancers, and musicians to share with them the cultural and musical connections and continuity of New Orleans and the larger Atlantic world. I have the privilege of recording oral histories with many local founders and performers specializing in African dance. The dancers and drummers exist as experts to educate and entertain their audience on the rhythm and ancestral memory of African dance; in turn, they also educate on the musical culture of New Orleans to the community. Their participation in Black New Orleans dance expressions allows them to embody African and Black dance's dual movements, rhythms, and culture.

The Interviews

Participants

To understand the culture surrounding African dance retention in Black New Orleans dance, I wanted to learn more about the history of African dance in New Orleans. In previous years, New Orleans Jazz has developed a relationship with local African dance and drum companies and their founders. The interviews explore the continuity of Black cultural practices through the three modes of Congo Square, traditional African drums and dances, and Black New Orleans cultural institutions surrounding dance in New Orleans. The topics ranged from similar and physical connections to Atlantic Africa, teaching of African dance, and Black New Orleans culture. Each participant agreed to conduct an oral interview and performance on their careers and studies in African and Black dance to be made available to the public.

1. Ausetua Amor Amenkum, founder of Kumbuka African Drum and Dance Collective and Big Queen of the Washitaw Nation Black Indian Tribe. Dance instructor at Tulane University.

2. Mariama Curry, founder of Culu Children's Traditional African Dance Company and N'Kafu Traditional African Dance Company.
3. Kai Knight, founder and director of Seasons Center and creator of the Cultural Ties Dance Festival. Dance instructor at the Loyola University of New Orleans.
4. Greer Mendy, founder, and director of Tekrema Center for Art and Culture.
5. Andrea Peoples, founder and director of KAC Nola, Afro-burlesque dancer.
6. Monique Moss, a dancer who specializes in Kongolese and West Indian dances,
7. Mikeall Ceasar, the director of N'Fungola Sibó African Dance and Drum. J
8. Joseph Baker, who is a member and leader of the Revolution Social Aid and Pleasure Club
9. The Black Men of Labor Social Aid and Pleasure Club. Todd Higgins, Fred Johnson Sr., Bruce 'Sunpie' Barnes.
10. Nailah 'Lalah' Smith, Gabrielle, Jawara Simon, and India Mack. Nkiruka Dance and Drum.
11. New Orleans Jazz NHP artists-in-residence, musician Darianna Videaux-Capitel, master percussionist Seguenon Kone, and Voodoo priestess Queen Kalindah Laveaux.
12. Jamilah Peters-Muhammad, Dr. Denise Graves, and Luther Gray, founders of the Congo Square Preservation Society and Bamboula 2000.

Additional third-party interviews and videos were accessed to study courtesy of The Historic New Orleans Collection's Costie Anderson collection, the New Orleans Jazz Museum,

and the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation's African Heritage Stage from New Orleans Jazz Festival.

The Interview Process

During my interviews, I asked each participant about African dance's history and culture in New Orleans. Noting that the usage of African dance is a broad term, it is accepted that African dance has become the catch-all name to describe the roots and centrality of Black dance in New Orleans. Initially, I asked the interviewees for their introduction to African dance. Among them, Mariama Curry and Mikeall Caesar received their training from the late 'Papa' Abdoulaye Camara from Senegal, former director of Les Ballet National du Senegal. Papa Camara was instrumental in developing the African dance scene in New Orleans dance instruction. Mariama would later take over the reins from Papa Camara with Culu Children's Traditional African Dance Company, where Mikeall was a former member. Later, Mariama created N'Kafu Traditional African Dance Company; their dances reflect the cultures of Senegal, the Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Mali. In the late 1980s, the trio of dancers founded their dance institutions. Ausetua Amor Amenkum founded Kumbuka African Dance and Drum Collective, whose dances and drumming specialize in the historic dances allegedly performed in Congo Square, the Calinda, Bamboula, Kuku (Cucu), Manjani, and Lamban dances. Kai Knight was a Congo Square Preservation Society member and Kumbuka who later founded the Seasons Center and specializes in Afro-Modern dance. In Kai's discussion, Afro-Modern dance combines the African diaspora and African American dances and the roots of their movements. Finally, Greer Mendy, who founded Tekrema Center of Arts and Culture, defines African dance as Black dance. In Greer's opinion, Black dance is defined by traditional dance practices by people of

African descent, derived from African sources, and evolved primarily from the processes of African American experiences.

Kumbuka, Tekrema, N’Kafu, and Culu are traditional African dance and drum institutions whose instruction, performance, and education combine the teachings of African dance and its resemblance to Black New Orleans dancing. In the follow-up questions on the connections between African dance and Black dance in New Orleans, Mariama, Ausetua, and Greer speak on their travels to West African countries in Ghana, Senegal, and Nigeria. In our discussions, they spoke about the historical connections between West-Central African cultures and New Orleans. However, each mentioned a disconnect between people in New Orleans on the distinct connection to African dance, drum, and music. In my interview with Mariama, she recalls, “a lot of people don’t understand where some things in New Orleans come from...there are untruths in discovering New Orleans’s Africinity.”⁸⁴ This prompted the next question, “Do people generalize African dance?” Their answers were a resounding yes.⁸⁵

As I asked the question on the generalization and stereotyping of African dance, as trained dancers, each participant could pinpoint what ethnic group, purpose, and spiritual influence of the dance is defined as. As the interviewees informed me, as the topic is related to New Orleans, when the enslaved population arrived in the city, enslavers group the enslaved people regardless of ethnic nation or origin. Free and enslaved people of African descent could exchange cultures and traditions in New Orleans today when permitted to congregate on Sundays. When I asked the

⁸⁴ Interview with Mariama Curry by Ariel Roy. July 20, 2022. Africinity is the quality or state of being African or of having African origins.

⁸⁵ I used African dance to describe the focal point of secular, religious, and popular Black dances in New Orleans. African American and Afro-Caribbean dance rhythms share African derivatives in movement, posture, and tradition. Throughout my interviews, the participants have addressed the label of accepting African culture and African dance not as generalizing but as embodying the diverse African cultures in New Orleans.

generalization question, the interviewees explained that their purpose is to deconstruct African dance stereotypes and educate their audiences on where each dance comes from.

Modern African dance and drum companies consist of N’Fungola Sibo Dance and Drum and Nkiruka African Dance and Drum. Each of their members comprises a younger generation of dancers who combine hip-hop, ballet, tap, and traditional African dance into their choreography. However, in our discussions, we discuss the intentional African retentions that are carried in Black New Orleans dance. The conversations later suggested Black New Orleanian culture and its resemblance to Atlantic Africa and the Caribbean. In my interview with Mikeall, our discussion focused on the oral traditions of African dance in New Orleans and how it is passed down from generation to generation. The dominance of Wolof, Kongo, Cuban, Yoruba, and Haitian cultures integrated into Black New Orleans culture. In her words, “Congo Square is a sacred ground where people often take it for granted...it is a space where the ancestors’ spirits are buried”.⁸⁶ These modern African dance and drum companies are more in tune with Black New Orleans culture reinventing dance and drumming through the diaspora. At the same time, established companies stress the importance of a connection between Africa and the Caribbean in relation to New Orleans. Two of the participants, Nailah and Jawara spoke on New Orleans’ African dance and drum community. Nailah states that the dances performed at second lines are like the processions and their footwork in the Caribbean and Afro-beats.⁸⁷ Jawara discusses how African drummers arrived in New Orleans and on both communities complement each other with their music.

⁸⁶ Interview with Mikeall Caesar by Ariel Roy. October 26, 2022.

⁸⁷ Interview with Nailah Smith by Ariel Roy and India Mack. September 15, 2022.

Traditional and modern African dance also includes Afro-Cuban and Afro-Haitian dance. My interviews with Monique Moss and Andrea Peoples, who perform Afro-Haitian and Afro-Cuban, respectively, discuss Black New Orleans dance's continuity with the West Indies' dances. Our questions entailed the French, Spanish, Indigenous, and Catholic inclusion of popular African-based dances like the Calinda, Yakadi, and the dances to honor the Voodoo and Orisha spirits.⁸⁸ I asked Andrea, 'Are any European and Indigenous cultures embodied in Afro-Caribbean dances?'. Andrea explained that mixing traditional African belief systems with Catholicism in the Caribbean aided continuity, which can be viewed as resistance. She further mentioned that in Afro-Caribbean dances, there is a difference in clothing, singing, and drumming that contrasts traditional African dances⁸⁹. African-derived dances in the diaspora created the space for change and cross-cultural dialogue for the survival of their cultures. Monique Moss teaches her students about the role that Congo Square has played in the cultural diversity of New Orleans. She further explained how Atlantic African cultures are strong in Haiti, and new rhythms came from Haitian migration to New Orleans and Congo Square gave attributes to it. To Monique, Congo Square is the crossroads of dance, music, and culture that currently exist in the African American communities of New Orleans,

Dancers from African dance and drum institutions in New Orleans are trained dancers, educators, historians, and choreographers. They provide the historical narrative of African dance and drum as teachers. They also serve as culture-bearers who protect the legacy of African dance, song, and drum in New Orleans, and their institutions serve as spaces where Black dance can be expressed. Within the historical framework, I asked each trained dancer(s) how African

⁸⁸ Interview with Andrea Peoples by Ariel Roy. August 9, 2022

⁸⁹ Interview with Andrea Peoples by Ariel Roy. August 9, 2022

dance tells a story or the significance of a certain dance. Their answers revolved around communal events that usually involved dance, singing, and percussion, like harvests, initiation rites, festivals, religious gatherings, war, funerals, and celebrations across Atlantic Africa. Similarly, the significance of Black dance in New Orleans exhibits resistance, struggle, joy, reunion, and memory that became influential due to Congo Square and continued through the Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights movement onto today.

The interview process included communicating with New Orleans' Social aid and Pleasure Club members. Fred Johnson Jr. and Benny Jones Sr founded the Black Men of Labor in 1993. Fred, Bruce 'Sunpie' Barnes, and Todd Higgins discussed the evolution of benevolent societies to social aid organizations. The Black Men of Labor's mission is to "create an organization that would reaffirm and pay tribute to the contributions of African American men in the workplace while promoting and preserving traditional jazz music."⁹⁰ I sought out the group to understand their inclusion of Ghanaian attire in their annual parades. Mr. Fred Johnson Jr. and Todd Higgins explained their visit to Ghana in the early 1990s. They saw a street procession in Ghana similar to a street procession and second line dancers in New Orleans. Since then, the Black Men of Labor have educated the public on the connection between West-Central African street processions and social organizers to the social aid and pleasure club of New Orleans. The street procession that Mr. Higgins described likely would have appeared different in the early 19th and 20th centuries, and the case could be argued for New Orleans. However, African and Afro-Caribbean processional parading is constantly changing.⁹¹ The dances, music, and rhythms

⁹⁰ The Black Men of Labor. <https://thebmol.org/>

⁹¹ Celestan. *Freedom's Dance*. 138-139

undergo ‘polyrhythmic improvisation’ where participants conform to identifiable movement patterns to the beat.

The interview process would not be complete without visual references to Black, African, and diaspora dance and drumming. Interview participants Kai Knight, Seguenon Kone, Kalindah Leveaux, Nkiruka, Mama Jamilah, and Baba Luther provided dance performances. Baba Luther and Mama Jamilah often perform ‘Funga Alafia,’ a West African welcome dance. Funga, or Fanga is a dance of hospitality that welcomes visitors into your home; the dance was made popular by the National Dance Company of Liberia.⁹² Baba Luther is the creator of Bamboula 2000, a fusion of rhythms from West-Central Africa, the Caribbean, and New Orleans, who demonstrated the Bamboula rhythm as the basis of New Orleans brass and jazz music. In their performance, the members of Nkiruka conducted two dances, a combination of Guinea Lamban and Manjani dances from the Senegambian region. India Mack, the director of Nkiruka stated that these dances bear similarities to masking Indians and social aid and pleasure clubs by showcasing their movements to show off their designs⁹³. Seguenon performed his favorite dance learned from his father; he speaks of how New Orleans reminds him of home in the Ivory Coast.⁹⁴ Kalindah’s performance included music that encouraged dancing and drumming that honored Papa Legba, the principal Voodoo spirit of the crossroads. The visual representations of these dances served as a cross-cultural communication between the connection between Black New Orleans dance and African dance.

Interview Results

⁹² Interview with Mama Jamilah and Baba Luther. Interview by Hunter Miles Davis and Ariel Roy. June 21, 2022.

⁹³ Nkiruka Dance and Drum. Introduction by India Mack. September 15, 2022

⁹⁴ Interview with Seguenon Kone. Interview by Ariel Roy and Jay Marcano. December 18, 2022.

I better understood the connection between African dance and Black New Orleans dance from the interviews and performances. Whenever I mentioned a historical document, reviewed literature, or interview I have seen on the prevalence of African cultural retentions in New Orleans, most interviewees agreed on the accuracy. Yet, it is understood that one must embrace themselves within the culture and seek out the history of African dance in New Orleans. Black dance synthesizes music, song, chant, and percussion. As Voodoo Queen Kalindah Laveaux told me, sometimes people who don't know the culture can misinterpret dance and New Orleans culture, comparing the dances to European and generalizing African.⁹⁵ In her words and others, New Orleans has developed a unique tradition of Black dance that can be traced back to the 1700s. I asked Greer how enslaved Africans in New Orleans continued the practices of African-based dances and why it is visible. Greer stated, "As enslaved Africans, they needed those retentions for physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual survival." If we view Congo Square in the past as a site for public entertainment for Europeans and white Americans, we are negating the purpose of Congo Square. People of African descent, while forced to adjust to Congo Square being one of the only regulated open spaces, found ways to continue their practices as a form of memory and freedom.

The results of the interviews produced collaborative answers to the questions that I posed. Greer, Mariama, Ausetua, Kai, Monique, and Mikeall discussed the history of enslaved people of African descent in New Orleans practicing their ethnic African and African diasporic dances at Congo Square. As Monique Moss exclaimed, "you can take people from their home country, but you cannot take away their culture."⁹⁶ They explained that including the drums in New

⁹⁵ Interview with Voodoo Queen Kalindah Laveaux by Ariel Roy. December 18, 2022

⁹⁶ Interview with Monique Moss by Ariel Roy. September 29, 2022

Orleans paved the way for African-based dances to continue. The African-based and later Afro-Creole dances performed at Congo Square and around the city survived through slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights movement. Ausetua, Monique, and Nailah heavily expressed the continuity of African-based dances. Between the three, they continued how the people of New Orleans continued dancing despite hardships, poverty, crime, and unemployment rampant throughout the city.

Dancers and performers such as Andrea Peoples and Darianna Videaux-Capitel are not locals of New Orleans but have decided to reside due to a strong Latin culture. They are musicians and dancers of Afro-Cuban and Orisha dances. Both explain that New Orleans's Latin music and dance community has welcomed them. Andrea studied the Dunham technique by Katherine Dunham, a famed dancer and anthropologist studying Haitian Vodou and dance. She later introduced to American audiences her work and choreography that Haiti influenced.⁹⁷ I asked Andrea about the similarities between Cuba and New Orleans. She explained that the drums and dances of Afro-Cuban performative social organizations like the Akabua, a fraternal masquerade society, and Cuban rumba groups are similar to second lines and Black Masking Indians.⁹⁸ Darianna is an artist-in-residence at New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park and co-founded Viva la Musica, a children's musical group for Hispanic and Latinx youth. In Darianna's interview, when she performs, she offers a prayer to her Orisha, Oshun, to give thanks. She later explains that many of the Afro-Cuban rhythms were started by Afro-Cuban and Haitian dances, as well as some of the rhythms incorporating African diasporic religions into their music.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Katherine Dunham. *Island Possessed*. (University of Chicago Press. Chicago, 1969)

⁹⁸ Interview with Andrea Peoples by Ariel Roy. Recorded August. 9, 2022

⁹⁹ Interview with Darianna Videaux-Capitel by Ariel Roy. September 13, 2022

To accentuate and give a visual reference to the evolution of African-based dances to Black New Orleans dance, the select institutions provided performative dances that bear African influence. Kai Knight's company, Seasons Center, demonstrated traditional Ewe dances, while Nkiruka Dance and Drum dancers demonstrated traditional dances from the Senegambian region. Although traditional Atlantic African dances bear little resemblance to modern Black New Orleans dances, the symbolism of traditional dances performed for secular and religious occasions is similar to modern dances. The question on the biggest difference between New Orleans and African dances spoke of traditional African dances attributed to specific dances; in New Orleans, the dances have been changed over time and incorporated movements from other cultures. Yet, during the interviews, I noticed the tension between trained African dancers and spontaneous dancers from local New Orleans cultural institutions. To spontaneous dancers, dancing is a way to express and celebrate a New Orleans tradition. African dance was seldom mentioned when questioned, but there were vibrant discussions on preserving African culture in New Orleans. Trained African dancers who have studied dance throughout Africa and the diaspora, including New Orleans, have stressed the inclusion of understanding the African roots of these popular dances in New Orleans come from. Nonetheless, all groups are coming to a better perception of African cultural retentions and memory of Black New Orleans culture. When prompted by the question to Mikeall on the current attitudes towards African dance in the youth, she spoke of the younger generations not respecting traditional African culture found in New Orleans.¹⁰⁰ Though, these attitudes are steadily changing.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Interview with Mikeall Caesar by Ariel Roy. Recorded October 26, 2022

For second lines and Black Masking Indian dancing in the streets to traditional African diaspora dance styles, more spontaneous and trained dancers are re-educating themselves on the New Orleans tradition of dancing. The older generation of Black performers is disappearing, though younger generations manage to keep traditions alive. Through oral traditions of passing the torch to the next generation, Black New Orleans dances continue to create new styles and rhythms while upholding the practices. Since the 20th century, some Black New Orleans performers have visited Africa to understand and appreciate the roots of second lines, Black New Orleans masking traditions, and popular Black dance genres.

The inclusion of African Atlantic drums, the djembe, talking drums, and dunun drums are of Mande origins. The bamboula drum is of Kongolese and Afro-Haitian origin. The conga drums, originating in Cuba, arrived in New Orleans through Cuban immigration. The proliferation of African-based drums symbolizes a call and response to and from the community. The drums and the dancers work simultaneously as the drummers call and the dancers respond. Inclusions of African drum rhythms later transitioned into traditional jazz and brass band music.¹⁰² Ausetua discussed the continuation of African drums through jazz, brass band music, hip-hop, and New Orleans bounce music. She stated that because Black dance in New Orleans never lost, the connection through the drums is why the retentions of African-based music are visible.¹⁰³

As reviewed in the literature, many of the dances performed by the New Orleans dance community members resemble the Afro-creole dances such as the Bamboula, Chica, and Calenda. Variations of West African dances performed by African dance companies, street parades, and second liners include the Bambara, Malinke, and Jola ethnic groups; Sonu, Manjani,

¹⁰² Turner. *Jazz Religion*. 116

¹⁰³ Interview with Ausetua Amor Amenkum by Ariel Roy. August 15, 2022.

Kuku, and Domba dances that all accompany drums. Mariama Curry explained, “these African dance companies exist to pay homage and respect to our ancestors and to take time to teach the community about their culture.”¹⁰⁴ From Atlantic Africa, ceremonial and folkloric dances unite the community and honor ancestral and spiritual worship. As many interviewees say, this inclusion of ceremonial dances again resembles traditional New Orleans dance practices.

There were limitations that I found out that still need to be thoroughly researched. Scholars on early African cultural retentions and practices in New Orleans and Congo Square have noted that the public and visual dance and music performances mirrored African Atlantic festivals. These festivals employed both secular and religious celebrations. However, the festivals are not discussed at length what African ethnic groups celebrated and what other groups took part in masquerading, religious, and social festivals¹⁰⁵. Cherice Harrison-Nelson, a Guardians of the Flame member, explains in her teachings that she has seen similar festivities in Ghana where dancers meet in masquerade and perform communication dances resembling Black Masking Indian dance practices¹⁰⁶. It would be helpful to understand the diversity of the enslaved African ethnic groups and Afro-descended peoples recorded in New Orleans and know precisely what dance traditions they brought to Congo Square and the city. Ausetua and Greer discussed the differences between rural versus urban and Black dance in New Orleans versus Black dance in the United States in their interviews. Greer proposed that African American culture in Tennessee, Georgia, or Mississippi has different retentions of African-based cultural practices. Future research could explore this path in Black dance outside of New Orleans.

¹⁰⁴ “Mariama Curry.” African Heritage Stage at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival. New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation Archives. May 2, 1992

¹⁰⁵ Walker. “El Día de Reyes and Congo Square: Links to Africa and the Americas.” 2-5.

¹⁰⁶ Al Kennedy. *Big Chief Harrison and the Mardi Gras Indians*. (Arcadia Publishing, Mt. Pleasant, 2010). 280-81, 348

Black dance in New Orleans is always performative. The performative culture exhibits religious and social functions. Since enslaved and free people of African descent were assumed to congregate at Congo Square, dance was performed as liberation, resistance, and memory. The continuation of circle dances, masquerade dances, dance, and drumming evolved into an amalgamation of Black New Orleans dances from African-based dances as the African American community navigated through the changing landscapes of New Orleans. Nonetheless, Black dance in New Orleans expresses survival and celebration. Dance complements music, iconography, and masking because it is also a form of cultural memory that embodies a variety of meanings.¹⁰⁷ Dance is another component; it can bring on spiritual possession by the ancestors, animate a mask, and serve as a means of a social or religious organization or simply a symbol of freedom.

The term freedom was explicitly expressed during the interviews and with the dancers, particularly by Ausetua. When asked what she likes about African dance, she said, “The freedom to express yourself.”¹⁰⁸ Freedom has allowed them to express their dance styles, honoring the memory of African dance in New Orleans. Freedom of dance is a memory and resistance of the formerly enslaved population liberating themselves every Sunday or any opportunity to congregate. The expression of freedom as it relates to Black dance continues well into the present in the street parades and the circles where dance is performed. Black dance in New Orleans has survived because of the culture, expressions in music and rhythms, and community involvement. She continued on, the people of New Orleans have survived crime, hardships, poverty, and more – yet once they hear the music, all of their troubles disappear.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Walker. “El Dia de Reyes and Congo Square”. 12

¹⁰⁸ Interview with Ausetua Amor Amenkum by Ariel Roy. August 15, 2022.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Ausetua Amor Amenkum by Ariel Roy. August 15, 2022.

As Ausettua alluded, New Orleans transformed the African concept of drums, dance, and spiritual worship into a culture that honors the past. Ausettua's comments on the freedom of dancing remind one of how the enslaved and free people of color citizens in New Orleans danced at Congo Square on Sundays, reclaiming their space and continuing their cultures despite living in a slave society. The performative nature of Black New Orleans dance has practiced the diversity and characteristics of an African diaspora culture because of freedom; it is the one thing that cannot be taken away.

Conclusion

With the help of Jean Lafitte and New Orleans Jazz Parks, the oral histories and public performances help understand the public expressions that Black New Orleans dance plays in New Orleans culture as a form of interpretation. Black dance in New Orleans cannot be understood without learning the social and political environments of Black cultural practices in New Orleans. The cultural practices of African dance can be found within the Black New Orleans dance community and traditions. Multiple spheres of African dance practices exist through institutions, cultural societies, religion, and public spaces, such as the predominately Black neighborhoods of New Orleans. After listening to the interviewees' upbringing and culture on African cultural practices of dance, dance is included in music, song, and drumming as each directly influences one other. Black New Orleans musical culture is seen and mimicked in Africa and the Caribbean, notably through bounce music, brass band instruments in street processions, and Afro-Louisiana traditional religions. Within the public narrative, dance is the in-between music and the drum when seen in New Orleans. The reinterpretation and reinvention of African diasporic dances in New Orleans have carried the tradition of expressing freedom, memory, and

resistance. Post-Civil War, Black New Orleanians have continued to shape their cultural existence despite hardships, struggles, and discrimination.

A strong and visible Catholic culture in New Orleans has influenced the spaces where Black dance is seen and performed. Catholic holidays allowed people of African descent to celebrate their cultures under the guise of Catholicism. According to John Thornton, “the new African Christianity allowed some African religious knowledge and philosophy to be accommodated in a European religious system and represented a merger of great significance.”¹¹⁰ Jeroen Dewulf also examines the formation of religious and secular brotherhoods within the African diaspora as institutions for carrying African-based cultural retentions and practices. Ned Sublette made a similar comparison of religious brotherhoods as cultural institutions for retaining African dance traditions. Black Cubans based their cabildos on their ethnic origin, Kongo, Ganga, Carabali, Arada, and Yoruba.¹¹¹

Local African dance companies and Congo Square equally have a role to play in keeping New Orleans’ dance and drum traditions alive. African dance companies serve as a cultural bridge to educate the public on the roots of Black New Orleans dance culture. As performers, they navigate between studying and performing African and Afro-Caribbean dances and being visual artists who live in New Orleans. Congo Square’s historic space has been reclaimed as a heritage site for freedom of dance, drum, and social expression. The square, and by extension, the participants, continues to be a memorable place that celebrates the diverse traditions of New Orleans’ African diaspora.

¹¹⁰ Thornton. *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Americas*. 235

¹¹¹ Sublette. *The World That Made New Orleans*. 114. Ganga nacion derives from West Africa, Ghana or Nigeria, Carabali nacion derives from Calabar, Nigeria and Arada nacion are from Benin.

Including the practices of African dance in Black New Orleans dance as an interpretation for the National Park Service will allow the public to appreciate the history of Black dance in New Orleans culture. Possibly, Jazz originated in African American social dance, which can be traced through African rhythms.¹¹² Each Park's mission is to understand the connections of southeast Louisiana and New Orleans to West Africa. I propose that each Park expands their network to include Atlantic Africa and the Caribbean to incorporate the diaspora. The project is primarily designed to provide National Park Service personnel in oral history, interpretation, and planning with the knowledge and understanding of African American heritage and ethnography in New Orleans. This project will challenge the original definition of 'Africanisms' under the National Park Service to explore new definitions. Throughout the oral history, Black dance in New Orleans and the organizations participating in dancing stress keeping the culture alive. With the services of the National Park Service, the programs that could sponsor community involvement within the Black Masking, spiritual, social aid and pleasure clubs, and an association with Congo Square will bolster greater recognition of traditional Black cultures in New Orleans. In addition, dance is crucial to understanding the origins of jazz music in New Orleans, African American dance, and the dance rhythms that continue to exist in Black performance spaces.

¹¹² African American social dance genres included 'shake-babe', buzzard lope, cakewalk, and juba dances. Possibly introduced through the American domestic slave trade to New Orleans and migration of Black rural Louisiana formerly enslaved after the Civil War to New Orleans.

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Glossary

- Akonting- a folk lute of the Jola people found in Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau. Like the American banjo
- Arada- an ethnic designation of enslaved Africans in Haiti from the Bight of Benin region.
- Black Masking Indian- African American revelers who dress in feathered and beaded suits influenced by maroons, Native American and West/Central African origins. Also known as Mardi Gras Indians
- Bakongo- a central African ethnic group that primarily resides in the western regions of Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo, in the northern regions of Angola
- Bamboula- a type of drum of Kongolese origin made from a rum barrel with rawhide skin stretched over one end. It is also a dance accompanied by the drum
- Brass Band- a musical ensemble consisting of brass instruments, most often with a percussion section. Became popular in New Orleans during military processions after the Civil War.
- Calabash- a West African musical instrument made from the calabash gourd. Found amongst the Yoruba and in Sierra Leone, like the maraca.
- Calenda- a folk, Creole dance of multitude. Also, known as stick fighting dance or Voodoo dance where men and women would with their thighs together and do pelvic thrusts.
- Chica- of Congolese origin, a dance consists of a woman holding a handkerchief, moving the lower parts of her hips and thighs. The man approaches her and appears to vigorously dance around her.
- Creole- in Louisiana, a multi-definitive term of any person with a mixture of European, African, and indigenous origin. Also, the term was applied to dances at Congo Square that were performed in similar style to Europeans by creoles of color.
- Congo Square- an area of land formally inhabited by indigenous Louisiana Indians that became famously used by people of African descent to partake in dancing, drumming, selling goods, and entertainment. Now part of Louis Armstrong Park in Tremé.
- Conga- a tall, narrow, single headed drum from Cuba, possibly of Bantu or Yoruba origins.
- Djembe- a rope turned skin covered goblet drum play with bare hands. Derived from the Bambara people, means peace

- Dunun- part of the family of Djembe drums, derived from the Mande people. A rope turned cylindrical drum with rawhide skin at both ends, usually played with sticks. Means big drum
- Fon- a West African ethnic group found primarily in Benin, Togo, and Nigeria. Also called Dahomey
- Jamba Dong- a Manding masquerade dance similar to the Kankurang. A was and aggressive dance.
- Kankurang- a masquerade dance on the Manding people. Also known as an initiation ceremony for young men. The masquerader dances towards the young men mockingly, symbolizes spirit possession and protection.
- Kuku- a Mande dance performed by women during a harvest, usually performed in a circle.
- Loa- or Lwa, are spirits in the African diaspora religion of Haitian Vodou and Louisiana Voodoo
- Mande- or Mandinka are a west African ethnic group from Mali, Guinea, Senegal, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and the Ivory Coast
- Manjani- a social and celebration dance of the Malinke people of Guinea and Mali. A dance that brings the community together to rejoice over paan important event such as the harvest, a wedding, or a naming ceremony.
- Orisha – Gods and goddesses of the Yoruba religion.
- Ring Shout- derived from west African and Kongolese ring circle dances. Presented elements of call-and-response and circular movement
- Sangamentos- is derived from the Kikongo verb ju-sanga that evokes the spectacular leaps, contortions, and gyrations of dancers, and mock-war performances
- Second Line- A street procession organized by Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs, behind the ‘main line’ of a brass band. And social and pleasure club members who are the first line.
- Social Aid and Pleasure Club- Organizations based in New Orleans communities that provide civic responsibilities, financial supports, cultural celebrations, and funeral rites
- Senegambia- a historical region in west Africa between the Senegal River and the Gambia River. Included ethnic groups, Mande, Wolof, Serer, Kissi, and Bambara
- Sohu- a traditional, spiritual dance of the Ewe and Bambara people from
- Voodoo- an Afro-diaspora religion practiced in parts of the Caribbean and southern US, combining elements of Catholicism with traditional west and central African religious rites and ancestor worship
- Yoruba- A west African ethnic group that mainly inhabits parts of Nigeria, Benin, and Togo

Vita

Born and raised in Harvey, LA, Ariel Roy completed her Bachelor of Arts in History at Xavier University of Louisiana. She is currently completing her Master of Arts in History with a Public History concentration at the University of New Orleans. As Ariel progresses in her education, she is searching for Ph.D. programs in African American and Museum studies. Currently, Ariel is pursuing a career in the National Park Service as a historian in training. Within the field, she hopes to bring forth NPS projects on Southeast Louisiana's plantation culture and history, Afro-Louisiana folklore retentions, and topics on African American spirituality, religion, hair, and music in New Orleans and rural Louisiana, and collaborate further with local southeastern Louisiana cultural institutions through the park service. Her research interests include the African diaspora, African studies, and race in Louisiana. Ariel's hobbies include an avid watcher of South African soap operas 'soopies', listening to R&B and rap music.