

Abstract

This chapter examines a rare film sequence of African American rhythm tap dancer Juanita Pitts dancing in a suit. Although the historical record shows that Pitts was certainly not the only skilled woman of her time to perform in a suit, twenty-first century viewers are inclined to deem Pitts an anomaly and interpret her clothes, shoes, style of dancing, and demeanor as atypical for a female dancer of her time. The chapter looks at biases that construct a “male center of gravity” and erase women from the official histories of tap. Providing a sketch of her career, it offers an analysis of the footage of Juanita Pitts to understand what it can reveal about battles over meaning at the intersections of race, gender, and rhythm tap. The chapter proposes the concept of the “aesthetic of the class act” to examine meanings embedded in her suit and performance style that illuminate her expressions of African American culture. Ultimately, it uses the Black feminist theory of Jayna Brown and Hazel Carby, along with White historian Joan Wallach Scott’s construct of elements that delineate gender as tools to better investigate the performance of gender in tap dance.

Keywords

rhythm tap dancer, Juanita Pitts, female dancer, race, gender, rhythm tap, tap dancing, African American culture, gender construction

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Juanita Pitts

Race, Gender, and the Female Hooper

Margaret Morrison

It Happened in Harlem (1945)

Juanita Pitts strides onto the dance floor with a jaunty air and swings into her tap routine, giving a warm, confident smile to her nightclub audience. She wears a cream-colored men's double-breasted suit, with the square, padded shoulders and sharply creased wide-legged trousers of the 1940s and plays the floor with her sturdy, low-heeled, dark suede tap shoes. She sports a masculine, crisp white shirt, and a thin, dark bow tie at her collar (Figure 26.1). The perfectly tailored suit moves easily on her small frame. From the neck down, the classic 1940s male shape starts wide at her shoulders and narrows to her hips. The jacket creates a line running from her armpit, straight past the waist to the hem of the trousers. Above the collar, Pitts styles her hair in an unmistakably feminine bouffant with a wide bun at the back.

Juanita Pitts's suit complements the rhythm tap style she embodies through her footwork, phrasing, physicality, and presentation. Her arms swing naturally as she lays down flat-footed stomps interspersed with flaps and shuffles in a variation of the rhythm time-step. She establishes the swing groove and builds her eight-bar phrases around swung eighth-notes and triplets that emphasize syncopated off-beats.

Pitts's suit gives no indication of comedy, in the manner of Mary Martin's oversized sailor's suit in the 1949 musical *South Pacific*. Pitts's clothing does not resemble the woman's pantsuit worn by Ludie Jones, a featured tap dancer with Cab Calloway. Neither is it a feminized

version of men's evening wear, in the style of Eleanor Powell's white, silk, sequined top hat and tails in *Broadway Melody of 1936*. Pitts's attire shows no sign of curve at the breast, waist, or hip; there is no extra decoration, frill, or flounce; and it reveals no extra skin. While from the neck down, she displays the epitome of sharp, male, sartorial fashion, her feminine hairstyle shows she is definitely not performing as a male impersonator, in the tradition of vaudeville star Alberta "Bert" Whitman.

This rare film sequence of an African American woman rhythm tap dancer challenges binary assumptions around the performance of gender and tap (Figure 26.2). Although the historical record shows that Pitts was certainly not the only skilled woman of her time to perform in a suit, twenty-first century viewers are inclined to deem Pitts an anomaly and interpret her clothes, shoes, style of dancing, and demeanor as atypical for a female dancer of her time. These attributes are read as signs of her "authenticity" as a rhythm tap dancer and evidence that Pitts crossed a gender line. My research questions these assumptions and explores the construction of gendered ideas in tap dance.¹

In this chapter, I avoid the question of "why did Pitts wear a suit?" that perpetuates the idea of a tap dance past of only two fixed gender expressions and Pitts as a unique phenomenon.² Instead, part I looks at biases that construct a "male center of gravity" and erase women from the official histories of tap. Part II provides a three-decade sketch of Pitts's career to recover what Brenda Dixon Gottschild calls the "invisibilized story" of "fabulous female dancing feet."³ Part III offers an analysis of the footage of Juanita Pitts to understand what it can reveal about battles over meaning at the intersections of race, gender, and rhythm tap. I propose the concept of the "aesthetic of the class act" to examine meanings embedded in her suit and performance style that illuminate her expressions of African American culture. I use Joan Wallach Scott's construct of

the four elements that delineate gender—culturally available symbols; social institutions and organizations that participate in the process of gender construction; normative concepts that typically take the form of fixed binary opposition; and personal identity—as tools to better investigate the performance of gender in tap dance.⁴ And I mobilize the writings of Jayna Brown and Hazel Carby to analyze the intersections of race and gender suggested in Pitts’s performance.

Part I: “Invisibilized” Women in Tap Culture

I first saw the clip of Juanita Pitts in 1987 and interpreted her artistic choice of 1945 through the lens of my own experience. I was part of a younger generation of tap dancers who were stunned by Pitts’s footage. Despite our years of professional level tap training and performance, we had never seen photos or film of a woman tap dancer from the past, hoofing in a rhythm tap style, wearing a suit and low-heeled, men’s shoes. At the time, I was performing with Brenda Bufalino in her American Tap Dance Orchestra, also wearing sturdy, low-heeled tap shoes, tuxedos, trousers, and vests. Bufalino, who had not known of Pitts, chose these unisex costumes for her company of men and women to convey her vision of tap dancers as an orchestra of musicians, to focus the audience on the sound, rather than pretty legs or sexy bodies. In the 1970s and 80s, wearing flat tap shoes with trousers transgressed the gendered status quo of a theater-dance scene where women who wanted to get hired for Broadway work wore high-heeled taps and high-cut leotards. From my vantage point, rhythm tap in a concert dance company allowed me to physically express my feminist sensibilities through serious rhythm-making, without the gendered restrictions of conforming to a feminine ideal. The dancers of my generation wondered if Pitts had had similar motivations, and questioned the older African American tap professionals who were Pitts’s contemporaries. They gave us information they felt was important: she was

known to them, well respected, was married to LeRoy Pitts, and had retired. “No,” we were told, “she did not dance like a man.” Their answers indicated they did not consider her outside of the norm in the Black nightclub world of their youth. The question remained: if we were not the first generation of women to tap dance in suits, why had we never heard of Juanita Pitts or seen this footage?

Many decades later, my research and performance pieces are still driven by this frustration at dominant narratives that “invisibilize” women’s participation in tap.⁵ These narratives create “gendered structures . . . of thought and feeling” in dance scholarship, criticism, reviews, and historiography.⁶ The stories that are told and retold affect how scholars and the general public understand the past of the art form and influence how tap dancers view themselves within their lineage. While recent research has recovered many women, invisibilizations persist.⁷

I term the persistent overlooking of women’s contribution to tap dance history and artistry as the “male center of gravity” in tap narratives, after Scott DeVeaux’s work on ideas that reoccur in jazz historiography.⁸ DeVeaux identifies ethnicity and other repeated themes that provide a “center of gravity” for jazz in the narratives. While DeVeaux omits masculinity as also providing a center of gravity, feminist scholars have questioned discourses that depict jazz as an exclusively male artistic expression. Jayna Brown asserts that “official histories of jazz are constructed by distancing themselves from black woman artists” and Black female dancing bodies.⁹ While I borrow DeVeaux’s term, I do not imply that gender and race are equivalent sites of power, identity, or meaning. The intersections of a male center of gravity within racist performance structures have particular repercussions for Juanita Pitts’s career and her subsequent

obscurity. Mid-twentieth-century segregations continue to warp twenty-first-century understandings of tap dance.

The male center of gravity attracts ideas and bends perceptions. The scarcity of film footage of women tap dancers of the past is misinterpreted as evidence that these women did not exist, when, in fact, aside from a few Hollywood stars, only a fraction of all tap artistry was recorded on film.¹⁰ The dearth of African American women in the filmed archive of tap is a result of the institutions of Jim Crow, the “exclusion and containment” of most Black artists into segregated variety circuits through the first half of the twentieth century.¹¹ While separate performance worlds nurtured vibrant art forms, and mainstream industries of White vaudeville, Broadway, and film were eager to capitalize on a few key Black stars, with rare exceptions, African American female dancers were excluded from White performance venues.¹² Few were filmed tap dancing and almost none were captured on big-budget films geared toward White audiences—movies that now make up the readily accessible visual archive of tap.¹³

The biases of film collectors also illuminate the gravitational pull toward ideas of male tap authenticity. In the pre-internet era, film collector Ernie Smith provided the public with one of the few resources of early twentieth-century tap dance imagery. Brenda Bufalino reports when she first viewed Smith’s extensive archive of tap and jazz dance on film in 1977, he showed her hours of clips of African American and White male tap dancers. “In four hours, not a single female soloist or trio.” When she asked, “Where are the women?” Smith told her there weren’t any, since, as Gene Kelly, said, “tap dancing is a man’s game.”¹⁴ Smith, who was mentored by Marshall Stearns, had gathered a film collection that, like the Stearnses’ *Jazz Dance*, illuminated a rich legacy while reconstructing dominant ideas about jazz.¹⁵ By the time Smith showed his collection at tap festivals and gatherings in the 1980s, he had footage of dozens of African

American and White female tap dancers segregated into their own reel, titled “Lady Be Good.” I believe when he started looking for women, he found them.

When the gravitational force pulls toward a male standard of excellence, men are stars and women are satellites; men are seen as embodying authentic artistry and women are considered weak imitators. Masculinity is valued, femininity devalued. Bufalino wryly notes the assessment of a 1980 reviewer that “women couldn’t tap dance, especially white women.”¹⁶ Writers and the public discredit women’s contributions through the glib repetition that tap ability is essentially male, or the trope “tap is a man’s game.” Tap narratives have tended to privilege the artistry of male soloists, duos, and trios, and ignore the contributions of female chorus dancers. A limited number of talented women soloists are lauded as anomalies, the exception to the rule, and portrayed as crossing an invented gender line. This creates material problems for living dancers, as ideas of authenticity influence who gets hired, what art gets made, and who ends up in the archive.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild points out that “figuratively speaking, dancers as a group are a subjugated ‘race.’”¹⁷ Hierarchical schools of thought have devalued dance in comparison with other arts, devalued the body in relationship to the mind, devalued Black culture, devalued women’s work. In the next section, I offer a recovery history of Pitts to counter the “erasure of contributions of black women from the critical record,”¹⁸ and in part III of this chapter, I propose some alternate methods to view tap that resist invisibilizations of female tap artistry.¹⁹

My biographical research on Juanita Pitts relies on detailed searches of five African American newspapers.²⁰ The gaps in information for Pitts could indicate periods when she was not actively promoted by an agent, or she could have worked under another stage name or anonymously as a chorus dancer, or temporarily left performing. Little is known of her personal

life or the exact location or date of her birth or death, or even if Juanita Pitts is indeed her legal name.²¹ I intend this sketch of her career as a starting point in research on Pitts's life and one more piece of evidence that women were skilled rhythm professionals, "laying down the iron like nobody's business."²²

Part II: Juanita Pitts's Career from the 1930s to 1960s

Juanita Pitts was most likely born before 1920 and was raised in Philadelphia.²³ In her youth, she won local acclaim at the Lincoln Theatre Kiddie Hour, an important springboard for young African American performers in 1930s Philadelphia.²⁴ Tap dancers LaVaughn Robinson and Leon Collins both reported that she trained with her husband Leroy Pitts, who had danced first with Collins in the act Leon and Leroy.²⁵ When that act broke up, Leroy taught the material to Juanita and refashioned the act into Pitts and Pitts.²⁶

Juanita Pitts's professional career was established before the late 1930s when nightclub performer Frances Nealy saw the duo at the Club Eureka in Sacramento. Nealy recalled: "She was such a terrific dancer. I'd never seen a woman dance like she did before. She danced like the guys. She was good. She almost made me feel like I couldn't dance!"²⁷ When Pitts and Pitts toured Midwest cities, their appearance in S. H. Dudley Jr.'s Creole Revue at the Cedar Gardens, Cleveland, was hailed as "Hotagious," "playing to capacity audiences twice nightly," and a "stupendous floor revusical."²⁸

Leroy appeared solo with star singer Billy Eckstein at the Apollo and at Smalls Paradise in 1944. By December, the "youthful dance team," of Pitts and Pitts were listed at Smalls, considered one of the top four nightclubs of Harlem.²⁹ Smalls Paradise was unique as an African American owned and non-segregated venue. Ed Smalls's club welcomed both Black and White patrons who could afford to pay.³⁰ A number of her contemporaries associate Pitts specifically

with this club. Mary Barrels Chissom reported that Pitts was admired by male tap dancers, but never received the recognition she deserved. Barrels felt that Pitts could do anything the men could do and could be equated with Teddy Hale, one of the most highly-regarded improvisational rhythm tap artists of the 1940s and 1950s.³¹ Though Barrels recalled Pitts performing in a suit, tap dancer Harold Cromer recollected Pitts wearing feminine costumes when she danced with her husband at Smalls.³²

In March 1945, columnist Billy Rowe announced Juanita Pitts working solo: “cute . . . female member of the team of Pitts and Pitts, is carrying on very capably as a single at Smalls, since her husband had to be rushed to the hospital.”³³ That same month, the *Baltimore Afro-American* reported “famous Hollywood director Bud Pollard signing bandleader Christopher Columbus . . . and Harlem’s noted emcee George Wiltshire, both of Smalls Paradise, as two of their stars” in the film, *It Happened in Harlem*.³⁴ The all-Black, short feature movie opened in Harlem on May 12, 1945, featuring the Smalls lineup: resident bandleader Chris Columbus; and his ensemble: Juanita Pitts; comic dance act Slick and Slack; exotic dancer Dotty Rhodes; Phil Gomez; George Wiltshire; Nickey O’Daniel; Milton Woods; and the Paradise Chorus. For unknown reasons, advertisements list Juanita as “Pitter-Patter” Pitts.³⁵ The *New York Amsterdam News* wrote that the film “proved good entertainment” and it played for over a year in Harlem and in African American neighborhoods in cities including Atlanta, Chicago, Kansas City, Little Rock, and Norfolk.³⁶

Although Juanita appeared solo in the film (Figure 26.3), Leroy rejoined the act and Pitts and Pitts continued at Smalls with Chris Columbus through the end of June. When this run ended, Leroy was booked as a single to head a new revue at the Elks Rendezvous in Harlem, and Pitts and Pitts appeared together in St. Louis with Billy Eckstein where “the crowd shouted its

delight.”³⁷ Dan Burley gave Pitts and Pitts a glowing mention in print that year, recommending they should be hired, along with headliners Stepin Fetchit (Lincoln Perry), Bunny Briggs, Mable Lee, and Baby Laurence, to strengthen the lineup and “bring gold, fame and people” to the newly opened Club Sudan.³⁸ Burley’s complaint of the weak floor show at an otherwise classy club featuring major stars Andy Kirk and the tap act of Pops and Louie,³⁹ and his high praise of Pitts and Pitts suggests the duo were considered among the top performers of the African American nightclub circuit.

After Pitts and Pitts opened the McKinley Theater in the Bronx in 1946, billed as “a girl, a boy and some rhythm,” Leroy’s name disappears from the papers I researched and Juanita continued to have an active solo career.⁴⁰ *It Happened in Harlem* is Pitts’s only known film appearance, but she was considered for at least one other. Despite the *Pittsburgh Courier* announcement that Juanita Pitts was slated to perform in “Jivin’ in Be-Bop” starring Dizzy Gillespie, Pitts did not appear in the finished film. Tap dancer Ralph Brown was featured, dancing an innovative blend of swing rhythms, bebop tap phrasing, and a flash finish of toe stands and wings. We can only imagine what Juanita Pitts may have done with Gillespie’s bebop compositions.⁴¹

By 1947, the nightclub circuit had changed drastically due to the 20 percent cabaret tax imposed on clubs with live music, dancing, and singing. The *New York Amsterdam News* reported, “Harlem Nite Clubs Dying; Only 1 Left”; Smalls Paradise kept its doors open while dozens of establishments closed. The American Guild of Variety Artists reported that in Harlem “more than 5,000 entertainers had been dropped from employment.”⁴² Despite the harder times for cabaret artists, Pitts continued to perform through the mid-1950s. She shared the bill at Club 845 in the Bronx for six weeks with Lindy hopper Frankie Manning and his troupe, the

Congaroos. When Manning was developing material for the act, he asked Pitts to put together a few steps for the Congaroos' tap routine. He remembered Pitts as "one of the top-notch female tap dancers around."⁴³ Tap dancer LaVaughn Robinson met Pitts in Detroit around this time and also recalled that Pitts was a good dancer.⁴⁴ In 1947, Juanita was back in residence at Smalls Paradise, billed as "Tops in Rhythm," where she shared the lineup with upcoming comedian Nipsey Russell and tap dancer Carnell Lyons and his trio, the Businessmen of Rhythm.⁴⁵

In 1950, Pitts appeared in Baltimore and shared the bill at the Roosevelt Theater in Pittsburgh with a top blues singer, an exotic dancer, and John Mason, the house comedian at the Apollo Theatre, who was listed as "one of the few remaining old-timers who works the 'blackface' routine." This lineup, called "balanced" by the *Pittsburgh Courier*, is a reminder that before tap dance died out as a viable profession, a wide range of American variety performance could be seen on a stage at the same time, from blackface comedy to up-and-coming blues singers, exotic dancers to rhythm tap.⁴⁶

The next year, she performed at the Silver Rail in Harlem billed as a "Versatile Song & Dance Stylist" and the *Philadelphia Tribune* hailed the appearance at the Club Ebony of their "localite," "singing dancing star," and former Kiddie Hour "great," noting "Cute Juanita Pitts . . . dances and sings her way into the heart."⁴⁷ LaVaughn Robinson noted her popularity in her hometown: "she would always stop at the Two Bit Club . . . regardless of who the dancers were, if she came through Philadelphia and wanted to work . . . she was always welcome to dance at the Two Bit Club."⁴⁸ At the end of 1951, Pitts had an extended run in New York City: two weeks back at Club 845 in the Bronx. In the Apollo New Year's show, she was billed as "Dancer Extraordinaire" and held over for two extra weeks "By Popular Demand! Our Smash-Hit Show and Revue."⁴⁹

Frankie Manning reported that “around 1953, 1954, things started slowing down a little . . . in New York especially, a lot of the nightclubs started closing . . . there were only a few big bands playing swing anymore, like Duke and Cab, and they were really trying to hang in there, mostly by doing concerts. Some of the musicians were still playing swing or bop in small combos, but many had gone over to R&B to make more money or just to keep working.”⁵⁰ While Pitts apparently performed less in the years after the run at the Apollo, she still appeared at a number of prominent venues including the Club Carib on Long Island, where she was billed as the “Queen of Taps,” and at the grand opening of the Club Ruby in St. Albans, Queens, which listed Pitts as a “Dancing Star” for their “glamorous affair” headlined by Mercer Ellington and his orchestra.⁵¹ *Ebony* reported in the early 1950s that St. Albans was becoming the “suburban Sugar Hill,” with homes owned by Harlem celebrities including Count Basie, Mercer Ellington, Billie Holiday, and Ella Fitzgerald.⁵² In Juanita Pitts’s last known gig, October 1955, the 125 Club in Harlem billed her as “Star Song & Dance.”⁵³

Honi Coles recalled that by the end of the 1950s there was “no work, no money. Tap had dropped dead.”⁵⁴ A five-and-a-half-year gap in the newspaper record indicates Pitts had left the business and was attempting a comeback. Les Matthews announced in his 1961 column, “Juanita Pitts, one time tops in taps, is training for a return to the stage.” A year later Matthews reported, “Former tap dancing doll Juanita Pitts will make her debut as a singer soon.”⁵⁵ Coincidentally, Hollywood icon Eleanor Powell made a successful comeback in New York City in 1961 at the Latin Quarter and toured her tap dance show around the United States,⁵⁶ but Pitts did not have the star power. Les Matthews’s two columns suggest that Pitts was living in Harlem in the early 1960s. New York City records show a Juanita Pitts, age fifty-two, who died March 16, 1966.⁵⁷

Juanita Pitts's career parallels those of many of her tap contemporaries, from 1930s childhood talent shows to a duo act that toured the country and played regularly at Smalls Paradise. Her active solo career from the mid-1940s to mid-1950s took her to New York's top venues in an act of songs and rhythm tap, and she performed until tap dance work dried up, with a poignant hint of a comeback as a singer in 1962. Like the vast majority of African American performers, Pitts's work in clubs and in her one film was for Black audiences (Figure 26.4). Without the opportunity to appear in nightclubs catering to White patrons, or on Broadway, in Hollywood feature-films, or early television, she did not have the renown among White audiences of other tap dancers of the day, such as Bill Robinson, John W. Bubbles, or Coles and Atkins. She apparently died before the resurgence of interest in tap of the 1970s. But Pitts clearly had enthusiastic audiences and the support of the Black press. Her African American tap contemporaries spoke highly of her decades later. A two-minute film clip and a handful of newspaper notices remain as tantalizing hints of the life and artistry of a female rhythm tap soloist.

Part III: Juanita Pitts's "Layered and Multiply-Coded" Dancing

Tap dance—a seemingly light form of pop entertainment--has been the site of hotly contested battles that pin ideas of authenticity or relative worth to the performance of race, gender, and dance style. Twenty-first-century audiences tend to read the clip of Juanita Pitts in *It Happened in Harlem* as a narrative primarily about gender: a woman crossing a supposed line by dressing and dancing in what is deemed a “masculine” style. This view does not allow for an understanding of gender as part of a complex construction, intersecting in historically specific ways with multiple other axes of identity, power, and meaning.⁵⁸ A narrow reading of Pitts's performance of gender contributes to the reinvisibilization of women who do not neatly fit into

preconceived categories—categories created by White dominant culture and patriarchal narratives. Juanita Pitts, like other Black women performers of her era, worked within and against constructions of racialized femininity.⁵⁹ Her artistic agency was nurtured by African American creative traditions and her options bounded by segregation. This section explores Pitts’s “layered and multiply-coded” dancing and the intersections of Black culture, gender, dance style, and history.⁶⁰ An intersectional analysis that considers multiple meanings is essential in understanding a polyrhythmic and Africanist form like tap. Foot rhythms interlock with physical expression to create a movement groove; jazz music, rhythms, and culture are brought to life through the tap dancer’s body. Analysis of tap dancing must start at the floor—where all meaning in tap begins—and be based in sounds as well as visuals.⁶¹ A close look and listen at Juanita Pitts as a foot musician reveals how her footwork and musical phrasing interact with her body use and rhythm tap style. Her suit suggests many meanings and I identify tools to understand the intersections of race and gender in the multi-signifying expression of Pitts’s tap dancing body.

Juanita Pitts “Performed Strictly Rhythm”

Brenda Dixon Gottschild defines rhythm tap as “the use of the feet as complex percussion instruments that enunciate and articulate musical rhythms, allowing dance to function as music and music to serve as dance. . . . What the torso does is secondary and an afterthought. The focus is on the feet.”⁶² This aligns with Pitts’s contemporary, Mary Barrels Chissom, who stated Juanita “performed strictly Rhythm,”⁶³ describing Pitts’s entire rhythm tap style—her footwork, the way she uses her body, her musical phrasing, and overall approach to performance.

The film clip opens with the emcee’s emphatic, “Introducing, Miss Juanita Pitts!” as the dancer strides in front of the band and swings into her routine by laying down full-footed stomps

offset by high-pitched treble notes: *a ruffle heel STOMP baDAP Stomp*. Her oh-so-cool energy draws the eye to her loose limbs, and pulls the ear to the sweet clarity of her feet at the bottom of her sharply creased trousers. She smiles warmly, and casually interjects an offbeat clap and a subtle swivel of her hip while effortless trills slap the floor. Her eye contact with the camera includes us—the live viewers—in the circle of her staged audience (Figure 26.5). While we can see how newspapers of the day called her “cute,” her expression does not include the big toothy smiles, mugging, or eye-rolling present in Hollywood footage.⁶⁴

At the bridge, she moves into a sequence of riffs: *riff HEEL across a-riff baDAP*. She sweeps the metal plates on the bottom of her shoes through the floor, striking with precise sounds, grounding the downbeat into her solid heel drops. During the entire two-minute routine, she keeps her torso relaxed and upright. True to rhythm tap style, her body weight swings into and out of the floor through easy joints, while her arms move in response to her leg rhythms. She does not use arm shape to create a visual picture separate from the music of her feet playing the floor. The first chorus ends with slippery scissoring triplets accented with flams and swinging stomps.

The majority of Pitts’s two-minute routine is structured around “three-and-a-break” (a two-bar phrase that is repeated three times and topped off with a two-bar break), but bears little resemblance to up-on-the-toes, time-step choreography that was popular in the earlier decades of the century. Instead, she emulates the rhythm tap innovations of John W. Bubbles as she swings her phrases in a 4/4 groove, creating rhythmic variations through flat-footed stomps, heel-drops, offbeats and fast footwork.⁶⁵

The camera focuses on a close-up of Pitts’s feet at the top of her second chorus. Sturdy suede tools hit in an onslaught of closely packed rhythms. Shuffle pull-ups—an airborne

manipulation of rolling sixteenth-notes—are followed by quicksilver slides and trills that pour out of flowing legs. At the bridge of this chorus, she breaks everything open with a deceptively simple sequence of shuffles, first on the right and then on the left. She streams into more variations of silky cross-legged patterns of fast footwork triplets.

It is impossible to determine the entire range of Juanita Pitts’s abilities from her two-minute sequence in *It Happened in Harlem*. The film features a very abbreviated nightclub scene of five different acts, whereas Pitts’s full live act would most likely have been around twelve minutes long, with several songs and tap routines of varying styles and complexity. Tap acts would open with a medium-tempo number, much like her work in the film, often followed by a slower soft-shoe, ending with an uptempo routine with plenty of applause-guaranteeing flash steps, all interspersed with songs and perhaps jokes.

For the last eight bars of her performance, the horns play in a shout feel, building in volume and intensity, as Pitts dances a flash finish of her heaviest rhythms—*STOMP brush heel badiddily BAP*—alternating with flying toe stands (Figure 26.6). She walks repeatedly on the points of her suede shoes, and ends with a cool, cross-legged pose and confident bow to the applause of her audience.

The Aesthetic of the Class Act

Juanita Pitts cannot be neatly placed into one of the style categories that Jean and Marshall Stearns delineate in *Jazz Dance*. She is neither a “flash” or acrobatic act (in the style of the Nicholas Brothers), nor an “eccentric” or comedy act (in the style of Slick and Slack who tap barefoot in the film, playing spoons and accenting the music with slapstick, comic moves), nor an “exotic” dancer, like the Smalls’s soloist Dotty Rhodes. Although Pitts looks like a “class act” by the sharpness of her suit, it is unlikely that her contemporaries would have considered a

female soloist in a suit, in 1945, as part of the lineage of great Class Acts, identified in *Jazz Dance* as duos of African American men.⁶⁶ The Stearnses' detailed history of jazz dance, with few exceptions, privileges male artistry and mirrors the biases embedded in jazz narratives. In order to open up methodological space that does not reinvisibilize women tap dancers who do not fit into gendered categories, I propose, instead, the broader concept of the "aesthetic of the class act" to describe Juanita Pitts's performance. She recreates a sensibility of ruling class behavior and respectability,⁶⁷ as she embodies empowerment through jazz virtuosity, cool demeanor, and sharp dressing. While the aesthetic of the class act was certainly widely embraced by variety artists of all ethnicities, a fundamental approach to art that combined cool excellence and respectability held particular significance for jazz-era African Americans as they negotiated institutionalized racial oppression.

Pitts embodies class in part through the Africanist "aesthetic of the cool," proposed by Robert Farris Thompson as a "dynamic sensibility" of "energy and decorum" in dances of the African diaspora.⁶⁸ Her cool style creates an appearance of control and effortlessness, which frames the virtuosity of her footwork.⁶⁹ Her tailored, cream-colored suit and easy performance serve multiple purposes. Her self-styling matches the sharp suits and cool demeanor of Chris Columbus's sidemen and other hip jazzmen of her day, effectively demanding that her audience view her as a serious music professional. The suit provides the wearer with masculine respectability, a strategy that serves to counter images of Black Americans as lazy, shiftless, stupid, oversexed, and immoral in popular culture.⁷⁰

Louis Armstrong's account of his first impression of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson reveals the importance, in the height of the jazz era, of finely dressed performers as national style setters and role models of empowered, Black masculinity.⁷¹ "Sharp," Armstrong recalled of seeing

Robinson first step on stage. “Lord knows that man was so sharp he was bleeding . . . he had on a sharp light tan gabardine summer suit, brown derby, and the usual thick-soled shoes.”⁷²

Armstrong was acutely impressed that Robinson excelled as a showman, dancer, and comedian without the minstrel conventions of “old raggedy top hat and tails with the pants cut off.”⁷³ The tap dancer’s aesthetic of the class act resisted a hundred years of ubiquitous Zip Coons and Sambos—racist representations from blackface minstrelsy that pervaded every level of American society depicting Blacks as unsophisticated and childlike, happy and subservient, or dangerous and irrational.⁷⁴ The musician particularly relished that even from the stage, the quality of Robinson’s clothes “stopped the show.”⁷⁵ Farah Jasmin Griffin states “the politics of respectability tells oppressed groups to put their best face forward.”⁷⁶ While this agency was denied African American performers in the Hollywood film industry, where they were portrayed as servants and laborers, Robinson was renowned on vaudeville and Broadway for his impeccable dress.⁷⁷ Young Louis Armstrong embraced Robinson’s example of how to command the stage as an African American man and star performer. Pitts’s performance reflects the importance of the suit in jazz culture, while additionally subverting the discourses of racialized femininity that Black women have contended with that depict them as hypersexual and even bestial.⁷⁸ Cool class, dignity, elegant clothing, and jazz virtuosity were some of the strategies through which Black artists, like Pitts, could “reclaim and define themselves.”⁷⁹

The Female Hoofing Body

Juanita Pitts’s footwork in this film sequence, her costume and approach to performance as a rhythm tap soloist are remarkably similar to the African American dancing men of her generation who called themselves hoofers. The vernacular term, “hooper,” takes on wildly varying meanings depending on historical context, who uses it, and whom it describes, and while none of her

contemporaries called her this, I stretch the elastic title to include Pitts. Her female hoofing body calls into question a female center of gravity in tap, presumably defined exclusively by the long-legged, high-heeled chorus dancer or soloist. Tap narratives and the majority of readily available tap films and imagery reflect the “hyper-heteromascularity of jazz performance,” what Sherrie Tucker calls “a division of labor by which men play in the band and women perform their bodies as sexual objects.”⁸⁰ Research has recovered imagery of women tap dancers in suits who did not perform their bodies as sexual objects, showing that Pitts is not an anomaly, but this imagery is difficult to find for an average tap dance fan. Popular conceptions of tap dance’s past are further skewed by the fictionalized recreations in nostalgic films and Broadway shows. As much as these mid- and late twentieth-century works are beloved, representations of female tap dancers in the film *Singin’ in the Rain* or in Broadway shows like *42nd Street* or *Black and Blue Revue* (to name a few) do not depict the range of gender expression of women on stage of the first half of the twentieth century.

Black female tap soloists, regardless of costuming, are additionally misinterpreted as anomalies because dancing women of color did not benefit from Bill Robinson’s breaking of the “two colored” rule. While Robinson brought down barriers that allowed African American male soloists of the first half of the twentieth century to find stardom on White vaudeville, Broadway, and later television, gendered segregations dictated that most dancing Black women in the United States—especially soloists—were excluded from White performance venues and films and contained within a vibrant all-Black variety stage.

Presence in the easily accessible archive of Hollywood movies legitimates a tap dancer in the public eye and secures their place in the historical narrative. Research into what is absent from this readily available archive reveals a range of gender expressions including, certainly,

chorus dancers and soloists in feminine attire, but also the Three Queens, a trio of White women tapping in Eton jackets and trousers in a 1930s Vitaphone short; Hollywood star Vera Ellen dressed in top hat and tails; and the skilled African American women rhythm tap dancers detailed by Cheryl Willis, many of whom performed in suits, including Edwina “Salt” Evelyn, Jewel “Pepper” Welsh, Mildred “Candi” Thorpe, Ludie Jones, Louise Madison, and others.⁸¹

Gender is not passively scripted on the body, Judith Butler reminds us. Gender is “put on” each time a dancer prepares to step on stage.⁸² A dancer’s body is “styled” through aesthetic choices and technical training, in an attempt to influence how an audience reads the meaning of their performance.⁸³ Joan Wallach Scott’s identification of gender as the perceived differences between the sexes and her four interrelated elements used in conjunction with the critical race theory of Daphne Brooks, Hazel Carby, and Jayna Brown can illuminate Juanita Pitts’s multi-signifying performance within the context of diverse gender constructions performed by women tap dancers of the 1930s and ’40s.

Scott’s first category of “culturally available symbols”⁸⁴ is adopted by Pitts in her embodiment of a classy, dignified, swing tap dancer and jazz musician. Pitts evokes images of men of her time, such as the class act of Coles and Atkins or bandleader Jimmy Lunceford. Pitts uses her body in dissent of the categories assigned Black women,⁸⁵ and dances as a tap soloist in front of the big band, not in the more typically seen female role as a man’s partner or member of a chorus—where the majority of women found tap dance employment. Pitts’s self-styling directs her audience to read her as a musician *and* female.

If Pitts crosses a gendered line, it is defined in part by the category of social institutions that participate in the process of gender construction. The institution of the 1930s and ’40s entertainment industry prescribed performance styles for all women and reinforced racist and

dominant White cultural ideologies that “define black female sexuality as primitive and exotic.”⁸⁶ Pitts’s understated use of her pelvis, hips, and chest—the “hot zones” of the body—underscores her performance as a “class actor.” These body parts, when they are in full use, speak “undeniably of the natural urges that a civilized body should restrain.”⁸⁷ Brown observes, “the expressive use of these ‘zones’ in dances were the language through which the gendered definitions of race and class were formed and contested in the body.”⁸⁸ Pitts’s easy expression through her suited body serves not to mask her gender—she is clearly female—but rather to redirect the audience’s eyes away from the culturally available symbol of the alluring, heterosexualized, Black woman on display, and direct their ears toward the meaning of her feet.

Film footage and imagery of women tap soloists and chorus dancers of the 1930s and 1940s depict tap excellence amid diverse expressions of gender. The visual archive shows Scott’s third element, the construction of gender through normative concepts of feminine dancing and costuming that take the form of binary opposition to representations of male dancers. Soloist Ann Miller used her long legs, bustier costumes, and sex appeal as keystones of her personal tap style. While African American tap dancer Lois Bright performed the identical athletic flash choreography as her partners in the Miller Brothers and Lois, she wore a feminine tuxedo jacket with a short skirt and higher heels and showed off her legs in solos of turns, walk-overs, and high kicks, in contrast to her male partners’ tuxedo pants and tails. Ginger Rogers’s elegant gowns and sweet dresses complimented Fred Astaire’s masculine suits. Alice Whitman, tap dancing star of the TOBA (Theatre Owners’ Booking Association), performed in scanty dresses next to her sister Alberta “Bert” Whitman, who played her dapper gentleman dance partner as one of the era’s most famous male impersonators. When Black and White women soloists of the era, such as Jeni LeGon and Eleanor Powell, performed in pants, often their

costumes were tailored to emphasize their womanly shape and distinguish them from male costars in their movies.

The fourth area of gender, personal identity, is where we know the least about Juanita Pitts. We do not know whether the suit was her habitual costume, why she wore it, or what the suit may have meant to her, beyond Mary Barrels Chissom's hint that Pitts "did not like her legs."⁸⁹ We can only speculate about Pitts's agency during the filming of *It Happened in Harlem*. Since race and gender are fields where "power is articulated,"⁹⁰ artistic control and setting determine in part the relative power between performer and employer, and how a dancer—Black or White, male- or female-bodied—is portrayed. Women on stage in any era must conform to the producer's dictates of femininity and heteronormative behavior, which is reinforced in myriad ways, through costuming, choreography, body language, the use of the smile, and hiring practices.⁹¹ Different types of venues—nightclubs, vaudeville, film, for-profit Broadway, or the nonprofit concert stage—dictate varying standards of femininity and allow different amounts of artistic agency. In vaudeville, women such as the Whitman Sisters directed their own productions with a level of creative control not accessible to women dancing in the big-budget film industry. It can be assumed that Pitts provided her own costume and danced her own material in a low budget film where ease of production would prohibit expensive interventions of a costumer or choreographer (Figure 26.7).

"People Wanted to See Flesh"

Two other tap dancing women, Pitts's contemporary in the 1940s Mildred "Candi" Thorpe, and my teacher Brenda Bufalino, forty years later, both offered insights into their choice of wearing suits.⁹² Bufalino's circumstances as a White woman, twenty years Pitts's junior, cannot be assumed to be identical to Pitts's. But, Bufalino's decision illustrates some of the ways women

dancers have utilized the suit to negotiate the terms of their artistic agency. Bufalino tap danced as a child in the 1940s in an all-White variety circuit and, because of segregation, had not known of Pitts or Thorpe. In the 1970s, Bufalino switched to low-heeled tap oxfords because high-heels could not produce the rhythmic and dynamic range possible in men's shoes. In 1980 she found that when she performed wearing a suit the audience and critics took her more seriously.⁹³ She recounted to her students her experience of sexual objectification as a young nightclub dancer in the 1950s: "I was trying to do art and drunks would yell, 'take it off!'" Bufalino addresses the issue in her song "Too Tall, Too Small Blues," asking, "How come, when I wiggle my hips and give a sly smile, you think it's a come-on, instead of my style?"⁹⁴ In Bufalino's experience, the suit freed her to dance as she wished. It enabled her, in the 1980s, to "look like" a rhythm tap dancer, aligned her with the artistry of her mentor Charles "Honi" Coles and the tradition of the Class Acts, and directed her audience away from reading an overt sexual message on her female body.⁹⁵

Although Pitts's male contemporaries never gave an indication that Pitts's suit was a subversive act, Mildred "Candi" Thorpe did state that her own choice of the suit was a subversion of the norms of her time. In the 1940s and '50s, Thorpe and her partner, Jewel "Pepper" Welch, performed in a successful rhythm tap and flash act as "Candi and Pepper" wearing costumes that desexualized their bodies, as Thorpe proudly recalled:

"We showed 'em what we had. They'd never seen two girls. And we were young, we were young. We never exposed any part of our body other than our face and our hands . . . Our costumes were zoot suits—shirts and ties. We used to wear the Windsor knot—big, big knot. And that alone—people . . . wanted to see flesh.

And for us to go into the Apollo and to score like we did is just amazing. We never exposed our body. Never.”⁹⁶

While Pitts, like Thorpe, performed within African American variety circuits where audiences expected to see female flesh, these audiences also clearly applauded the rhythm skills and virtuosity of young women of color who made alternate choices, and who provided the Black world, as Brown notes, “with a language of the resilient, mobile modern body.”⁹⁷ An important distinction must be made: in the 1980s, Bufalino preferred the suit because it helped her signal to her audiences how to read her skills. But Pitts or Thorpe did not need the suit to convince their audiences of their talent. The acclaim they received at the Apollo and their consistent employment in top venues suggest that for Pitts and her African American audiences, concepts of tap excellence were not linked to ideas of gendered self-styling.

When audiences view Juanita Pitts’s film footage several generations after her death, her performance destabilizes dominant narratives that gather ideas of tap excellence around a male center of gravity. Pitts’s career shows how Black women also shaped tap artistry and, if we allow her to, Pitts can subvert gendered assumptions of tap history and remind us that the legacy of segregation still invisibilizes female hoofers of the past. Pitts’s embodiment of African American cultural traditions, her rhythm tap styling and cool performance of the aesthetic of the class act redirects the eye beyond racialized and gendered stereotypes and brings the ear back to the feet. “Here I am,” we hear her telling us, “with my sturdy shoes and oh so sharp cream suit, laying down the iron.”

Notes

¹ Grateful appreciation to Thomas F. DeFrantz for guidance, encouragement, and the opportunity to bring this research to publication. I am deeply indebted to an anonymous reader for

astute and invaluable feedback, and to Sherrie Tucker for early mentorship and the tools to start this research. Thank you to Cheryl Willis, Ann Kilkelly, Constance Valis Hill, and Dianne Walker for conversations and support.

² Sherrie Tucker notes the “exceptional women” narrative (or “perpetual phenomena phenomenon”) pays tribute to jazz women without actually including them as full participants in jazz narratives in “Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies,” in *Current Musicology* (Spring 2001): 385.

³ Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 107.

⁴ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 43–44. Scott emphasizes that none of these four elements operates without the others.

⁵ Gottschild’s term, invisibilization, describes mainstream White culture’s mechanism of adopting Africanisms while rendering Black origins invisible. I use the term also to express gendered ideas of authenticity that erase women from the official records of tap.

⁶ Hazel Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 12.

⁷ Rusty Frank, Nadine George-Graves, Constance Valis Hill, Germaine Ingram, Jacqui Malone, Cheryl Willis, and others have recovered biographies and imagery of women tap dancers of the past. For my discussion of Brian Seibert’s marginalization of women’s contributions in *What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing*, see Morrison, “Tap Dancing: Reports of Our Death Have Been Grossly Exaggerated,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, September 18, 2016, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/tap-dancing-reports-death-grossly-exaggerated/>.

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- ⁸ Scott DeVeaux, “Constructing the Jazz Tradition,” in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert O’Meally (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 483–512.
- ⁹ Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 4.
- ¹⁰ I address limits and biases in Hollywood tap footage in “Tap and Teeth: Virtuosity and the Smile in the Films of Bill Robinson and Eleanor Powell,” *Dance Research Journal* 46, no. 2 (August 2014): 35.
- ¹¹ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 110.
- ¹² Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 4–5; see also 164.
- ¹³ I follow American Psychological Association guidelines for bias-free and inclusive language and capitalize Black and White when referring to these racial identifiers. Exceptions are in quoted material where lowercase was used by the original author. The Center for the Study of Social Policy states: “To not name ‘White’ as a race is, in fact, an anti-Black act which frames Whiteness as both neutral and the standard. . . . [T]he detachment of ‘White’ as a proper noun . . . removes accountability from White people’s and White institutions’ involvement in racism.” See <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/racial-ethnic-minorities> and <https://cssp.org/2020/03/recognizing-race-in-language-why-we-capitalize-black-and-white/>
- ¹⁴ Brenda Bufalino, *Tapping the Source: Tap Dance Stories, Theory, and Practice* (New Paltz, NY: Codhill Press, 2004), 71.

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- ¹⁵ Ernie Smith, “Recollections and Reflections of a Jazz Dance Film Collector,” *Dance Research Journal* 15 (Spring 1983): 46–47. The Ernie Smith Jazz Film Collection, including this footage of Pitts, is archived at the Smithsonian Institution.
- ¹⁶ Bufalino, *Tapping the Source*, 71.
- ¹⁷ Gottschild, *Black Dancing Body*, 11.
- ¹⁸ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 169.
- ¹⁹ My research is driven by the desire to make sure women, including myself, are not written out of our own history, with the additional responsibility, as a White woman, to reverse the trend that “even the most thorough and thoughtful researchers have tended to discount the participation of African American women in the development and popularizing of the tap form”; (Germaine Ingram and Deborah Kodish, “Stepping in Time,” *Works in Progress: Newsletter of the Philadelphia Folklore Project, special commemorative issue* 8, no. 2 [1994]: 26).
- ²⁰ I searched twenty newspapers in the ProQuest Historical Newspaper database for Juanita Pitts, Leroy Pitts, and the team of Pitts and Pitts. I found mentions in five African American newspapers: *New York Amsterdam News*, *Baltimore Afro-American*, *Chicago Defender*, *Philadelphia Tribune*, and *Pittsburgh Courier*. I also did a restricted search in microfilm of select dates in the *New York Age*.
- ²¹ Although Cheryl Willis proposes that Leroy Pitts could have been Juanita’s brother, Pitts’s contemporaries and the newspaper record indicate he was her husband. Pitts’s childhood stage name and maiden name are still unknown.
- ²² Germaine Ingram, Debora G. Kodish, and Barry Dornfeld, *Plenty of Good Women Dancers: African American Women Hoofers from Philadelphia*, DVD (Philadelphia, PA:

Philadelphia Folklore Project, 2004).

²³ Cheryl M. Willis, "Tap Dance: Memories and Issues of African-American Women Who Performed Between 1930 and 1950" (PhD diss., Temple University, 1991), 192.

²⁴ Frances Cauthorn, "The Night Shift," *Philadelphia Tribune*, September 11, 1951.

²⁵ Germaine Ingram, e-mail message to author, November 11, 2009.

²⁶ Dianne Walker, telephone conversation with author, December 6, 2009.

²⁷ Quoted in Rusty E. Frank, *Tap! The Greatest Tap Dance Stars and Their Stories, 1900–1955*, rev. ed. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 252.

²⁸ "Going Back Stage with The Scribe," *Chicago Defender*, November 11, 1938, national edition; "'Hotagious' Group at Cedar Gardens, Cleveland," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 5, 1938; Ted Yates, "Ace Performers in Cleveland's Night Spots Are Clicking," *Pittsburgh Courier*, November 19, 1938; Russell Cowan, "Detroit Notes," *Chicago Defender*, November 11, 1939, national edition.

²⁹ "Harlem Heart Throb," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 15, 1944; "Display Ad," *New York Age*, December 16, 1944; Abe Hill, "Agenda of Places for Xmas Visitors," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 2, 1944; "Dan Burley's Back Door Stuff," *New York Amsterdam News*, December 30, 1944.

³⁰ Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900–1950* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1982), 170; Barry Kernfeld, ed., "Smalls Paradise," in *New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* (New York: Grove's Dictionaries Inc., 2002), 127.

³¹ Willis, "Tap Dance: Memories," 192–93.

³² Harold Cromer, conversation with author, December 5, 2009.

³³ "Billy Rowe's Note Book," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 3, 1945.

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- ³⁴ Bud Pollard, *It Happened in Harlem* (All-American News, 1945), film, 25 min.; “They’re in the Movies Now,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, March 24, 1945.
- ³⁵ “Display Ad 112—No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 12, 1945.
- ³⁶ Abe Hill, “A Pin Up Who Plays—Evelyn Aramburg Interesting,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 19, 1945.
- ³⁷ “Display Ad,” *New York Age*, June 30, 1945; Abe Hill, “Theatrical Jottings about This and That,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 30, 1945; “Press, Guests of Chamber’s Riviera,” *Chicago Defender*, November 10, 1945, national edition.
- ³⁸ “Dan Burley’s Back Door Stuff,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 22, 1945.
- ³⁹ “Display Ad,” *New York Age*, December 22, 1945.
- ⁴⁰ “Display Ad 124—No title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 22, 1946. Leroy Pitts’s absence from major African American papers in an era when nightclub performers had steady work, suggests a number of directions for speculation, but no concrete information has been found.
- ⁴¹ “Gillespie Inked for Musical Pix,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 12, 1946; “Jivin’ in Be-Bop (1946),” *Internet Movie Database*, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0038654/>.
- ⁴² “Harlem Nite Clubs Dying; Only 1 Left,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 25, 1947.
- ⁴³ Frankie Manning and Cynthia Millman, *Frankie Manning: Ambassador of Lindy Hop* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), 205–6.
- ⁴⁴ Willis, “Tap Dance: Memories,” 193; Ingram, Kodish and Dornfeld, *Plenty of Good Women Dancers*.
- ⁴⁵ “Display Ad 114 – No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 21, 1946; “Display Ad 87 – No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 25, 1947; “Classified Ad 7 – No

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- Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, April 12, 1947; “Classified Ad 7 – No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 3, 1947.
- ⁴⁶ E. B. Rea, “Encores and Echoes,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, September 9, 1950; “Roy Brown, Ida James Head Roosevelt Show,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 19, 1950.
- ⁴⁷ “Classified Ad 6—No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 2, 1951; “Display Ad,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, September 15, 1951; Frances Cauthorn, “The Night Shift,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, September 11, 1951.
- ⁴⁸ LaVaughn Robinson in Ingram, Kodish, and Dornfeld, *Plenty of Good Women Dancers*.
- ⁴⁹ “Classified Ad 2—No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, November 17, 1951: “Classified Ad 2—No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 29, 1951; “Classified Ad 3—No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 5, 1952; “Classified Ad 1—No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, January 12, 1952.
- ⁵⁰ Manning and Millman, *Frankie Manning*, 215.
- ⁵¹ “Classified Ad 9—No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, September 27, 1952; Eleanor Fearing, “Queens Jottings,” *New York Amsterdam News*, June 6, 1953.
- ⁵² Anderson, *This Was Harlem*, 348.
- ⁵³ “Classified Ad 3—No Title,” *New York Amsterdam News*, October 22, 1955.
- ⁵⁴ Quoted in Constance Valis Hill, *Tap Dancing America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 163.
- ⁵⁵ Les Matthews, “Mr. 1-2-5 Street,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 20, 1961. Les Matthews, “Mr. 1-2-5 Street,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 19, 1962.
- ⁵⁶ Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 206–7.
- ⁵⁷ New York, NY, Municipal Archives, *Index to New York City Deaths, 1888–1982* (New York

Genealogical and Biographical Society Collection, n.d.).

⁵⁸ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 222.

⁵⁹ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 190.

⁶⁰ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 15.

⁶¹ Thomas F. DeFrantz encourages deeper exploration into "how tap dance achieves meaning" in "Being Savion Glover: Black Masculinity, Translocation, and Tap Dance," (2002) <https://web.mit.edu/people/defrantz/Documents/begloverdoneshort.pdf>.

⁶² Gottschild, *Black Dancing Body*, 122.

⁶³ Quoted in Willis, "Tap Dance: Memories," 193.

⁶⁴ Juanita Pitts's dance sequence can be seen in the streaming video *Tap Dance History* (Math); a section of the clip is in *Plenty of Good Women Dancers* (Ingram, Kodish, and Dornfeld). It is archived at the Smithsonian and the Schomburg Library. I viewed the entire film *It Happened in Harlem* at the Library of Congress Motion Picture and TV Reading Room.

⁶⁵ Marshall and Jean Stearns, "John W. Bubbles and Rhythm Tap," chap. 27, in *Jazz Dance: The Story of American Vernacular Dance* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 212–19. Also see Margaret Morrison, "John W. Bubbles," *Dance Heritage Coalition's Exhibit of America's Irreplaceable Dance Treasures*, Dance Heritage Coalition 2012,

<https://webarchive.loc.gov/all/20180307234910/http://treasures.danceheritage.org/bubble>

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⁶⁶ Stearns and Stearns, "The Class Acts," part nine in *Jazz Dance*, 285–311.

⁶⁷ I am indebted to Thomas F. DeFrantz's insights that helped me frame my premise of the aesthetic of the class act (email message to author, May 1, 2010).

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- ⁶⁸ Robert Farris Thompson, “An Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance,” in *signifyin(g), sanctifyin’, & slam dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*, ed. Gena Dagel Caponi (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 74.
- ⁶⁹ Jacqui Malone, *Steppin’ on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 34.
- ⁷⁰ Farah Jasmin Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: Free Press, 2001), 71.
- ⁷¹ Malone, *Steppin’ on the Blues*, 30.
- ⁷² Louis Armstrong, *In His Own Words: Selected Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 184.
- ⁷³ Armstrong, *In His Own Words*, 28.
- ⁷⁴ Marlon T. Riggs, *Ethnic Notions* (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1986), VHS.
- ⁷⁵ Armstrong, *In His Own Words*, 27.
- ⁷⁶ Griffin, *If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 72.
- ⁷⁷ I discuss this anecdote and Robinson’s negotiations of minstrel stereotypes in “Tap & Teeth.”
- ⁷⁸ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 232.
- ⁷⁹ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 227.
- ⁸⁰ Sherrie Tucker, “When Did Jazz Go Straight?: A Queer Question for Jazz Studies,” *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 4, no. 2 (2008),
<https://www.criticalimprov.com/index.php/csieci/article/view/850>.
- ⁸¹ Willis, “Tap Dance: Memories.” Images of these women can be found in Willis, “African American Rhythm Tappers,” in *Dancing Female: Lives and Issues of Women in Contemporary Dance*, eds. Sharon E. Friedler and Susan B. Glazer (Amsterdam:

Overseas Publishers Association, 1997), 161–65. See also Cheryl M. Willis, *Tappin' at the Apollo: The African American Female Tap Dance Duo Salt and Pepper* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2016).

⁸² Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 531,

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893>.

⁸³ Gottschild, *Black Dancing Body*, 11.

⁸⁴ Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 43–44.

⁸⁵ Daphne Brooks, quoted in Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 282–83.

⁸⁶ Hazel Carby, “It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometime,” in O’Meally, *Jazz Cadence*, 472.

⁸⁷ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 173.

⁸⁸ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 173.

⁸⁹ Barrels quoted in Willis, “Tap Dance: Memories,” 193.

⁹⁰ Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, 45.

⁹¹ I examine Hollywood’s construction of Eleanor Powell’s submissive femininity in my article “Tap and Teeth.”

⁹² Willis points out the similarities of Bufalino’s and Thorpe’s choices in “Tap Dance: Memories,” 299.

⁹³ Bufalino, *Tapping the Source*, 72–75.

⁹⁴ Brenda Bufalino, *Cantata & the Blues*, VHS (New York: American Tap Dance Foundation, ca. 1992).

⁹⁵ Ann Kilkelly, “Brenda Bufalino’s Too Small Blues,” *Women and Performance* 3, no. 2 (1987–1988): 67–77. See also Hill, *Tap Dancing America*, 235.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Ingram and Kodish, “Stepping in Time,” 23.

⁹⁷ Brown, *Babylon Girls*, 237.

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Juanita Pitts in *It Happened In Harlem*. Archival film and video materials from the collections of the Library of Congress.



Figure 26.1



Figure 26.2



Figure 26.3



Figure 26.4

Juanita Pitts in *It Happened In Harlem*. Archival film and video materials from the collections of the Library of Congress.



Figure 26.5



Figure 26.6



Figure 26.7