

“D”-CYPHERING THE JIT:
DANCING DETROIT HISTORY AND CULTURE

A DISSERTATION

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DEDICATION

For my loving parents Dr. Charles and Bridget Blosser.

What I learned from my mother:

“There is value in learning—no one can ever take an education away from you.”

What I learned from my father:

“Discipline and hard work always pay off” and “during the process of writing keep your priorities straight, always eat dessert before the main course because wasted time equals unproductivity—excellence requires sacrifices.”

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my late father whose disciplined spirit helped me write every day and to my mother who always encouraged me to believe in my abilities and pursue my dreams in dance.

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ABSTRACT

MELANIE ANASTACIA VAN ALLEN

“D”-CYPHERING THE JIT: DANCING DETROIT HISTORY AND CULTURE

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This dissertation maps the development of a largely unknown Detroit cultural product, the street dance Jit, which emerged at the same time Detroit was losing its champion auto industry in the early 1970s. The scope of this history begins with the dance collective the Jitterbugs and their invention of the original Jit and traces other subsequent dance groups, such as the Funkateers, and the infamous street gang the Errol Flynns, who are credited for influencing the contemporary style Jit, created by the Mad Dancers in the early 1980s. Throughout these danced histories this dissertation demonstrates how Detroit, its manufacturing methods, and cultural production are inextricably intertwined, producing the city’s distinctive identity. This dissertation comes out of ethnographic research at a particular practice cypher in Detroit, focusing on people who are continuing the Jit culture in the city and beyond.

The theoretical framework of this dissertation draws on the work of Cynthia Novack and her method of ethnohistory, providing a means to address the interrelated nature between Jit’s culture and history, considering its history as of a way of life and a technique of dancing as part of a culture.

I also utilize Clifford Geertz's concept of culture and webs of significance, Keith Jenkins' notion that history is a social discourse that is always partial due to inherent gaps in knowledge, and Deidre Sklar's consideration of dance as a form of cultural knowledge.

Over the course of one year, I conducted fieldwork in Detroit, beginning in February 2018. Primary data-collection methods included conducting interviews with dancers and music producers/DJs from the Jit community, participant observation including learning how to Jit, choreographic analysis of video recordings of the Jit, and the examination of archival materials and scant literature on the Jit, revealing a substantial gap in the scholarly literature. Within this small amount of scholarship, the cultural and historical contexts surrounding the emergence of the Jit have largely been ignored. This research fills a gap in the dance studies literature on street dance and contributes to a growing body of literature on Detroit's cultural productions.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Prologue: Driving Detroit

So, Hello Detroit, a beautiful ugly
When it comes to overcoming there is no one above thee
The grittiest pretty when you come out to my city
Make sure you use your mind, might not make it if you ain't witty

—MAHD, “Hello Detroit” (2014)

Techno city
Hope you enjoy your stay
Welcome to Techno city
You will never want to go away

—Juan Atkins/Cybotron, “Techno City” (1984)

In 1701, French explorer and fur trader Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac founded the city of Detroit. By the mid-seventeenth century, Detroit was the epicenter for the French Indian war led by a chief from the Ottawa tribe named Pontiac. In 1901, Ransom E. Olds invented the first American car in Detroit. Eleven years later, in 1912, Henry Ford installed the first automated assembly line, which allowed Detroit to create its own niche market through mass-manufacturing automobiles.

This tremendously compressed rendering of Detroit's history reveals how closely intertwined that history and the automobile—whether it be a Cadillac, Pontiac, Oldsmobile, or Ford—have been in creating the city's distinct identity, often referred to as the “Motor City.”

Detroit, Michigan is shaped by complicated relationships with urban structures and borders—geographic, metaphorical, racial, and aesthetic—where culture, history, and the car collide. The experience of driving in and out of Detroit is determined by vast intersecting freeways, byways, and service drives that construct an explicit car culture, which assumes that everyone *should* own a car, if not two. The arrival of the automobile offered North Americans a nuanced rendering of the term “freedom”: in theory, the car offered the possibilities to traverse through space with a sense of independence, agency, and fluidity. However, the possibility of “getting out” of Detroit is complicated by socially-constructed racialized borders and the declining state of the city's economy and industry. For example, standing at the edge of downtown Detroit, one has a “stone's-throw,” crystal clear view of Windsor, Canada, but can only get there by car, via the Ambassador Bridge or through the tunnel under the Detroit River that separates both cities.

The city's paved roads, avenues, streets, and boulevards contain more meaning than their respective names suggest. Eight Mile Road, the delineating line separating Washtenaw and Wayne counties from Macomb, Livingston, and Oakland counties, also functions as an imaginary Mason-Dixon line, dividing the black and white populations,

largely as a result of Detroit's race-relations uprising of 1967. Generally, African American residents live south of Eight Mile whereas white populations reside north of Eight Mile. Detroit-based rapper Eminem sang about the literal and figurative struggles of travelling on traversing Eight Mile Road: "I am no longer scared now/I'm free as a bird/Then I turn and cross over the median curb/Hit the burbs and all you see is a blur/I'm Eight Mile Road" (Eminem 2002).

Woodward Avenue, on the other hand, serves as the demarcation line separating the Eastside from the Westside, where a Detroiter's identity and social class is determined by what side of the avenue one resides on. Driving on I-94 in Southeast Detroit, one can see the iconic 80-foot high Uniroyal car tire, which was manufactured for New York's World's Fair in 1964-65. Continue driving toward the downtown area, The Motor City Casino's architecture encapsulates the essence of Detroit's heyday, the Fordist era, with modernist, machine-like accents of chrome and sleek lines, reminiscent of the high-performance "muscle cars" of the 1950s-1960s. Driving north from downtown on Grand River Boulevard, two museums in close spatial proximity to each other house sonic artifacts of Detroit's rich musical culture: Hitsville U.S.A. and its Fordist inspired "Motown sound" and Exhibit 3000, with its Post-Fordist futurist output of techno. Unlike the vintage-vibe of the quaint white and royal blue painted house of the Motown Museum, lined with manicured shrubs and colorful beds of flowers, Exhibit 3000 (with entrance by appointment only) has no signage indicating it is even a museum, making it difficult to find on a street lined with identical industrial-looking buildings. The esoteric, austere nature of Exhibit 3000 (formerly a textile and laundry workers union

building and also a hide out for the former labor union boss James “Jimmy” Hoffa) stands as a metaphor for Detroit’s techno music and dance culture: to find the underground in Detroit, you have to work for it.

Continue driving south on Woodward to Cass Avenue, and you’ll find another nondescript building, one of the most important for this dissertation, the Cass Corridor Neighborhood Development Corporation (CCNDC), a multipurpose facility available to rent for private functions. However, in the Jit culture, it is most commonly referred to as “Stringz Spot,” because of the practice sessions Haleem “Stringz” Rasul has been hosting there for over a decade. Stringz Spot served as the nexus for my fieldwork in Detroit, which like Exhibit 3000 and Detroit’s techno music and street dance culture is anti-establishment, inconspicuous, and not easily accessible without the proper connections.

This simulated experience of driving the city of Detroit serves as a prequel to the dissertation, connecting facets of Detroit’s history and culture found throughout the dissertation, revealing in the process how closely intertwined culture, cultural production, history, and the automobile have been in producing the city’s distinctive identity. Likewise, as this dissertation will show, the Jit, too, traverses the city as it moves across bodies, time, and space.

How I Got to the Jit

The motivation behind this dissertation began with my interest in the development and persistence of a unique Detroit cultural product: the street dance Jit, which developed at the same time Detroit was losing its champion auto industry in the 1970s. I wanted to understand how the practitioners of the Jit describe their experience of belonging to the

Jit culture and was curious about possible connections between the development of the Jit and Detroit's depressed environment and labor conditions. Broadly, this research lives at the junctures between culture and industry and practice and theory. More than that, however, it stretches back to my own history with the Motor City.

I was born in a suburb located thirteen miles outside of Detroit. My grandfather worked industriously between Chrysler Engine and the Dodge Main Plant's assembly line for forty years. In my early teens, I listened to techno's synthesized, high-tech sounds over the airways of Detroit's independent radio stations. I attended numerous after-hours and underground parties inside abandoned warehouses, even at the defunct Packard plant, where I literally danced on top of remnants produced on the plant's now lifeless assembly line, such as scrap metal and fragments of rubber tires, while Detroit DJs spun the mechanized, futuristic sounds of techno well until the wee hours of the morning. I witnessed dancers Jitting at festivals and parties in Detroit. Even though I did not know how to dance the lightning-fast and intricate footwork of the Jit, I realized at an early age how unique and distinctively "Detroit" the dance form was as I never saw it performed outside the city limits.

Despite my long-time interest in the Jit, I had very little knowledge of the dance's history, mechanics, and terminology. When asked to define the Jit I usually said something like this: the Jit is a Detroit-based street dance usually performed to Detroit techno music with the arms and legs moving in harmonious correspondence with each other, along with exceptionally fast, complex movements of the feet. This description, based on my experience of seeing the dance performed live in Detroit and on video on

social media, began to feel hollow to me. I acutely felt my lack of direct contact with the dance and its practitioners, and the impossibility of understanding a cultural phenomenon like the Jit from afar, especially one so outside of my own cultural context. Trying to analyze the Jit on YouTube began to feel like a form of armchair anthropology. Although choreographic analysis can and indeed does have an important role in this research, I began to sense that the historical foundation, dance vocabulary, and social elements that constitute the Jit culture could not be gleaned through analysis alone.

In 2011, while pursuing a Master of Arts degree at New York University's (NYU) Tisch School of the Arts, department of performance studies, I started officially researching and writing about the Jit. As evidenced by the fruitless hours of researching various books, academic journals, databases, and dance readers, it was apparent there was very little published literature on the Jit. Four years later, in 2015, during one of the summer residencies in the PhD dance studies program at Texas Woman's University (TWU), while enrolled in the scholarly writing course I attempted to write a journal-length article on the Jit. Since graduating from NYU, no new academic knowledge had been published on the Jit; there were no historiographies or ethnographies that I could use as sources. In order to write a scholarly journal article, my methodology relied mostly on movement analysis and connecting critical theories to what I gleaned through studying Jit videos on YouTube and social medias outlets; similar to the methodology I employed to write my master's thesis at NYU. Writing the article left me feeling like an uneasy outsider. I tried to the best of my ability to paint a picture of a dance culture that I only knew from afar, but in the end felt dissatisfied with the results. However, the process of

writing that unsubmitted journal article clarified for me that my dissertation research would have to be ethnographic. To truly get at the Jit, I would need to go to Detroit.

My initial vision for this dissertation placed the culture of Jit at the nexus of this study, while critically reflecting on a time period in Detroit's history, the 1960s to the present day, to understand the relationship between Detroit's cultural and industrial production. Even though tracing the history of the Jit and these other cultural and industrial elements of Detroit's story was always important for this project, I did not intend to write a *history*, per se. I planned to conduct an ethnographic study, centered on the current Jit culture, contextualized in Detroit's history of deindustrialization. However, once I began observing the culture and interviewing its members, an important history emerged. My research in the Jit community revealed that culture and history were not as disparate as I had believed. This forced me to grapple with not only the relationship between history and culture, but also *how* to write a history. Over time, this dissertation developed into what Cynthia Novack calls an ethnohistory (1990, 16), shaped by ethnographic fieldwork methods of interviews, participant observation, alongside movement analysis of video recordings of the Jit, and the examination of archival materials and scant literature on the Jit.

The title of this dissertation, "'D'-cyphering the Jit: Dancing Detroit History and Culture," is a wordplay on the term decipher. Many people in Detroit and in the surrounding suburbs affectionately refer to the city as "the D." The term "cypher" stems from the African American tradition of dancing in a sacred circle, frequently utilized in many street dance cultures to practice technique, showcase movement, and battle other

dancers (Dodds 2016, Johnson 2011). Placing the terms together illuminates the process of intuitive meaning-making I employed while conducting fieldwork inside (and outside) practice Jit cyphers in Detroit. The subtitle “Dancing Detroit History and Culture” references the crux of my data, which was historical and cultural, gleaned from my fieldwork. The title and the subtitle together point to an ethnographic framework that examined the interconnected nature of the Jit’s history and culture.

The following sections of this chapter review literature central to my understanding of how the culture of Jit and its histories are mutually imbricated. First, I discuss Clifford Geertz’s concepts of culture and webs of significance. Second, I draw on Keith Jenkins to formulate history as a social discourse that is always partial due to gaps in knowledge. Finally, I present Novak’s idea of ethnohistory as a framework for this dissertation that brings together both culture and history. But first I bring in the voices of my participants to articulate what the Jit means to them.

Who is in the Jitting Community? What is Jit Culture? Participants Speak

The current Detroit Jit community, according to Tristan “Tick It Master” Hackney, is a relatively small “pretty tight-knit” community in which generally everyone knows each other.¹ The community consists mostly of young-to-middle-aged African American men who—as evidenced by the numerous practice session videos posted frequently on various social media outlets—practice their craft, usually by themselves, in their bedrooms, kitchens, basements, living rooms, garages, dance studios, in outdoor

¹ Unless otherwise noted, quotes are from interviews with my research participants.

spaces, and even at their place of employment. Jitters are also able to practice every Monday and Wednesday evening at the Cass Corridor Neighborhood Development Center at a cypher/practice session Haleem “Stringz” Rasul has been hosting since 2005. Jitters can also showcase their talents at various nightclubs and lounges in the city of Detroit, such as the Blues Café and the State Fair Lounge. These venues usually promote Jit exhibitions, which is a non-competitive environment to showcase one’s footwork, and sometimes they promote cypher battles where Jitters dance against other Jitters in a series of battle rounds determining who has the superior technique and performance style.

Although the Jit is almost a completely male-driven dance community, there have been a small number of notable female Jitters including Tanya G, Tiki from the X-Menn dance crew, twin sisters Shawanna and Kawanna, and Queen Gabby.² According to Gabby Smith:

there might be like two or three females at the Jit battles. You will see Tiki and [Queen] Gabby. [Queen] Gabby, she popped up at the State Fair [Lounge]. You don’t see many women battling, they are more like twerking and just doing some other stuff that has nothing to do with battling.

On the ratio of male to female Jitters in Detroit, Gabby continues, “obviously, Jitting is heavily populated by men. For every nine out of ten there’s probably only one or two female Jitters,” in the scene in Detroit. Kenya “Standing Ovation” Sutton claims that “females in the Jit game, we bring a different type of swag.” She purports that within the

² I was able to get in contact with Tanya and Gabby to set up an interview but unfortunately due to schedule conflicts and geographic constraints, I was not able to interview them before I left Detroit.

community “the females don’t bicker as much as the guys” because they are largely outnumbered by men in the culture.

When I asked Jitters to describe the attributes of their community, their responses are quite varied, although most of the responses convey the passion and love the Jit community holds for the craft, as well as the competitive nature needed to perpetuate the Jit’s high level of technique. John Nance of the X-Menn crew compares the gritty and competitive nature of the Jit to the breaking world, as they share the commonalities of being born in the streets and engaging in cypher battles to determine who has the superior dance skill. Reggie “Munch” Turner describes the Jit community as “extremely talented,” “very passionate,” but also “very creative and at the same time very competitive. Competitive in terms of skills, trying to embellish the craft.” Tristan also explains the community’s competitive nature. He explains, “in a lot of instances we can work together, in other instances it’s still kind of one of those situations where different crews are all trying to be number one at the same time. So, at times it can be friendly competition but at other times it can be legit beef with an individual or group.” Eric Broadnax portrays the Jit community as “one big dysfunctional family,” specifying how the competitive environment effects the social relations within the Jit community. He says, “Everybody got love for each other, but nobody wants the other person to thrive more than them. It’s a crab in a bucket mentality.” Willie “Sonic” Hull compares the level of competitiveness to the world of professional sports. He says, “I don’t know what’s the most competitive sport, but Jit would be up there in that category,” because “everybody is looking for that shot, looking for that time.” John thinks that the

community “could definitely use some strengthening and unity,” saying, “It’s hard to get everybody on the same page.” But “the one thing I know for sure—everybody love Jit.”

Willie explains the Jit community’s relationship with other street dance cultures: “the Jit community itself is looked past,” which he thinks is unfortunate because “we got an amazing thing going on here.” In comparison to other street dance cultures like b’boying/girling and house, the Jit is not as well known. However, Kenya explains that online social media outlets have given the Jit a presence within other international street dance cultures, as she has “talked to people [online] from Germany, Holland, France, Italy and they love Detroit. They love our music and they love how un-cut we are” because she feels Detroit’s isolated dance culture has not been “tainted.”

Haleem describes the Jit community as “talented and raw,” but largely insulated from other dance communities. He explains, “we are in a bubble. I am definitely around the dancers here and when I go out [outside of Detroit]—knowledge and etiquette and things like that seem to be foreign inside of Detroit.” Being isolated “can be a pro and a con because I feel like it keeps us unique” he says. However, the downside of being segregated from other dance cultures has resulted in not have having the proper tools or etiquette to engage with other dance worlds. Haleem says:

we don't know how to interact with the rest of the dance community. I'm talking about the rest of the urban dance community. Now that we have the Internet it's a little bit different but still, hands on is different. Like how to interact in competitions. Even how to go about documenting dance. Things like that we seem to be out of touch with as a dance community here in Detroit.

Willie also describes the Jit community as raw and says, “Just as a dancer, even if you come here and want to learn Jit, the Jit community can be rough. They are...we call it “critiquing.”” because “they just like things to be done in a proper sense.” And as a final word, on being a member of the Jit community, Willie says, “You’re gonna get honest answers [on your technique]. I’ll put it like that.” Even though the stability of the Jit community functioning as a collective is not consistent; there are moments of solidarity, intercut with dissonance.

The terms community and culture were used somewhat interchangeably by my participants, however, community generally referred to the demographics and group of people physically creating the community (past and present), whereas culture was more indicative of what occurs or is created *inside* this community. For many people, the Jit (as a dance form) and Jit culture were indistinguishable, as they were experienced as equivalent and inseparable. Some participants used the term culture as an intangible force, an ideology that can only be known and understood from being an insider of the Jit world. Kenya, who is also known by the moniker “The Queen of Detroit,” gives a definition of culture that is worth quoting at length:

Culture to me is like, what it is—what [it’s] made it. If I’m traveling to a new country or a state, what am I actually looking for? What is that thing that makes your city or your country pop? Is it the neighborhood? Is it the people? The music? The food? When I think about culture I think about the whole aspect of the state or the country. When people say culture, and we all have different cultures, even within dance. In New York you have the flexing culture, in Detroit we have the Jitting culture, in LA you have more of the poppin’ and the funk styles cultures. So, when you come to Detroit, what are you looking for? You are looking for our culture. What makes Detroit? Jitting. Culture is just the whole, the nucleus, it’s like what is binding all of this together. What is bringing these people together?

What is making these clubs pop? What is making people go to these studios? The culture continues to grow because we continue to plant seeds in each and every person. That's how we are connected within the culture.

Kenya and others spoke about “spreading the culture,” “supporting the culture,” “doing it for the culture,” and “keep[ing] the culture moving.” Kenya explains the obligation she has to help disseminate Detroit’s dance culture: “It’s not the fact that I call myself the queen just to sit on my high horse and say that I’m better than anybody. It’s actually me trying to help my community and my culture. So, I’m gonna do me, but I’m going to also put on for my community, whether I am in the scene or out of the scene.” Being a part of the Jit culture, according to Kenya, holds a particular moral responsibility that requires individuals to push the Jit culture forward before promoting themselves as individual dancers or experts of Jit.

Reggie addresses this obligation and its importance for preserving the legacy of the Jit. He says, “Well, I just hope for the best for Detroit. I hope that this culture will really go somewhere. I hope that the mindset alters, to take it serious and not just take it in terms of a minute, competitive type thing—to prove something.” Mike Manson offers his solution for disseminating Jit culture outside of Detroit, explaining, “it just takes me being consistent and for everybody feeling like they can reach out to me. Ask me a question. That’s how you keep the culture going. Jitting ain’t about me—it’s about spreading the culture.”

Culture: (Jitting) Webs of Significance

Clifford Geertz’s theories on ethnographic methods and the concept of culture are useful for visualizing the culture of Jit not as a standardized neatly organized entity, but

as a multifaceted complex network of knowledge. As these descriptions from Jitters show, dancing inside and outside of the Jit cypher (whether in a battle, social settings, or during a practice session video posted on social media) spins multiple webs of significance that move among diverse principles and debates that shape this dance culture. As a cultural phenomenon, the complexity of the Jit expands beyond just its historical relevance as the dance form contains profound meaning, symbolism, and purpose. In addition to the above, practitioners have also described the Jit as a feeling, a spiritual entity, a survival tactic, a bible study, as Kung Fu, and as a savior. Many of my participants explained that the Jit keep them from getting into trouble by keeping them out of the streets. When asking dancers questions about the contemporary Jit, replies were inextricably tied to aesthetics and history, as well as social beliefs and embodied practices. Cumulatively, all of the responses positioned the Jit as a culture—as a way of living. Thus, the culture of Jit is a socially-situated semiotic process replete with its own set of rules, history, feelings, bodily techniques, and principles, where the individual movements signify much more than just a physical dance practice. As an expression of the human experience in Detroit, Jit functions as a visible manifestation of social relations occurring between members of the Jit community and also how each individual reacts to the different environmental factors in Detroit.

This description of Jit's culture resonates with Clifford Geertz's articulation of culture as fundamentally semiotic through what he describes as "webs of significance." He states, "Man is animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science

in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (1973, 5). Geertz takes culturally-based data and actively reads its semiotic or decodable elements to identify both the structures of signification and the detailed nuances of cultural behaviors. Geertz’s method of deciphering behavioral and performative symbols provides a vehicle to converse with the social discourse of culture by getting to the core of culturally-situated phenomena and then expanding culture’s trajectories and unlocking its possible motives. In other words, applying his ideas and methods for examining culture allow for a greater understanding of how and why people dance the Jit in Detroit.

After thoroughly analyzing and coding the data set of this research study, mostly consisting of interviews and participant observation, numerous themes emerged on the specific elements of Jit culture. On paper, the multi-coded nature of the symbolism and meaning inherent within the Jit culture did not seem to fit into tidily ordered horizontal tables as there were linkages and crossovers between elements. A more fitting visual/spatial template is inspired by Geertz’s webs of significance: Jit culture is envisioned as a self-contained matrix shaped by distinct webs containing various themes materializing from the data. An individual web represents one specific facet of Jit culture and its shape is spun by social discourse and bodily techniques of the culture’s practitioners. However, this discourse is not always necessarily in agreement within the culture. Further, these webs are not fixed in time or space; they glide in the interstitial space and can expand or crossover into other webs, indicative that Jit culture is neither static nor monolithic.

As valuable as Geertz's webs of significance is visualizing the compound nature of the Jit, I must make the disclaimer that the Jit is not a delicate, pristine, fragile structure of a web—Jit is durable, gritty, aggressive, and street. Thus, these Jitting webs could be conceivably spun from material closer to titanium alloy, which is strong but flexible.

Constructing Jit History

Just as there is not one unified definition of Jit culture, there appears to be no standardized history of the Jit. Historian Keith Jenkins' ideas on history as a process, not a product, are useful for this project's theoretical basis. Jenkins' assertion that constructions of history will always have inherent gaps in knowledge as there is no single history on any given subject or event largely shape and reflect the histories assembled in this dissertation.

History, according to Jenkins, is not "waiting" to be told as a product, but instead is a discursive process brought to life through one's perception and intuition. Jenkins does not define history in terms of the historical past, but rather, as "one of a series of discourses about the world" (2003, 6). He contends that historical discourse does not create the world but appropriates it and then assigns its meaning. He cautions that the past and history are not analogous but rather, "float free of each other, they are ages and miles apart" (2003, 7). Jenkins argues that it would be helpful to refer to the historical past (events that have already occurred) as the *past* and to utilize the word historiography in place of the word history. "The past is gone, and history is what historians make of it when they go to work," thus, for Jenkins, history (historiography) is "an inter-textual,

linguistic construct,” which is always limited and subjective to one’s own relationship to the historical period of time under examination (2003, 9). These various ideas reveal that history is crafted and is always an incomplete work in process. In this case, these histories have been constructed by the Jitters I talked to and danced with, as well as through my writing.

Jenkins’ insistence on history always being a partial construction helped address my own concerns of how to write a history by removing the pressure to write “the-end-all” comprehensive account on the Jit. Further, his observation that “the amount of content available to a historian is virtually limitless and one cannot recount more than a fraction of what has occurred” was helpful, and reassuring, for understanding why even the most thickly-detailed historiography will always be incomplete (2003, 14).

A considerable portion of my data was historical and as such, I contended with how to deal with the inherent gaps of knowledge. I implemented a mapping system that allowed me to work with these holes in generative ways. I charted relationships across the city, across physically and socially constructed borders, across bodies, and across space and time. As an example, charting the lengthy and complex history of the automobile in Detroit, at a first glance it is conceivable to think these singular stories live in a vacuum, frozen in historical time, disconnected from the present day. However, delving deeper, the involved stories of the car have traceable threads that connect culture, industry, gestures, bodies, and names. Through this process of navigating over, though, and around these gaps, I also realized that Jit’s culture and history were not as unrelated as I had thought.

Ethnohistory

When my participants discussed the Jit, generally the history was in close association to the culture; in fact, they were tightly bound in many instances. For example, often a question from me about a particular step would result in a story about past dancers or dances. Thus, I came to realize that attempting to separate the two is futile. Trying to write about these separately can potentially remove associations that provide greater insight into how the history informed the culture, or how the culture actually shaped the historical trajectory of the Jit. In other words, history does not exist in a vacuum, as it could not exist without the culture, and vice a versa.

Cynthia Novack's method of ethnohistory provides a means to address this interrelated nature of Jit's culture and history. In *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*, Novack defines ethnohistory as the attempt "to describe and analyze the history of a way of life and a way of dancing as part of a culture" (1990, 16). Novack's text was vital for the field of dance studies as it advanced the ethnographic practice idea of looking at an American dance form through historical and cultural lenses. For this dissertation, Novack's approach is useful methodologically and theoretically as it not only acknowledges the dependent nature between cultural production and history, but also how the dancing body can serve as a conduit for understanding and tracing these connections.

As an example, through the process of mapping how dance was found in the history and history was found in the body, the common thread that weaves itself throughout the chapters of this dissertation: culture *is* the embodied histories. Like

contact improvisation, the history of the Jit is a way of life and a way of dancing as part of a larger social process. In the Jit culture, a dancer's relationship to time and place directly informs how they perceive the history they had a part in creating, and temporal and environmental realities also shape how practitioners identify the cultural and theoretical qualities of the Jit. As such, the culture and history of the Jit are entangled. As the participants responses show, culture frequently overlaps with historical discourse, specifying not only "how and why," but "what and when," revealing the impossibility of detaching cultural context from historical discourse.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 2, "Looking in the Rearview: Detroit History Seen Through Industry and Cultural Production," presents a partial history of Detroit, Michigan, outlined by the crossroads of the city's music (Motown and techno), automobile industry, with issues of race threaded throughout. Originally, this chapter was meant to serve as a theoretical framework for dissertation, however after analyzing the ethnographic data, I had to let my a priori theoretical analysis go in favor of the ethnohistory the participants practiced and talked about. Nonetheless, this chapter offers an important context for the city and its cultural production. Detailing how the city's proclivity for making metal things influences its sonic and kinetic things, this chapter argues that Detroit, its cultural production, and manufacturing methods are intertwined. Constructed through theoretical and historical sources, the first section of this chapter presents how industrial mass manufacturing, music and dance, and the eras of Fordism/modernism, and post-Fordism/postmodernism have functioned in relation to each other. The second section of

this chapter focuses on Detroit, after the city filed for bankruptcy in 2013, a period of time when Detroit was proclaimed dead, an idea largely propagated through the genre of disaster photography. In contrast to this diagnosis, through choreographic analysis of Detroit-based dancer Jittin' Jesus' YouTube series *Jittin' Ain't Dead*, I explain how his embodied intervention pushes against this narrative, and through his footwork he continues to construct the postindustrial city.

Chapter 3, "Methodology: Ethnography," presents an overview of the methodological processes, procedures, tools, and ethical practices employed for this research, and explains ethnographic methods that influenced my approach to the fieldwork I conducted in Detroit. I explain my initial ethnographic research design and analytic questions guiding this research and I briefly introduce my research participants. Finally, I present my methods for data collection and analysis, and address ethical considerations that arose during fieldwork and the processes of data collection.

Chapter 4, "Documenting the Origins of the Jit: Haleem "Stringz" Rasul and the Jitterbugs," presents a partial history of the Jitterbugs and their invention of the traditional Jit in the 1970s, assembled from interviews I conducted with Haleem "Stringz" Rasul and Johnny and Tracey McGhee, as well as the archival materials, such as Haleem's documentary *The Jitterbugs: Pioneers of the Jit* (2014), and the McGhee brother's television appearance on *So You Think You Can Dance* in 2013. Through a circuitous historical narrative, the chapter presents important key moments, music styles, and important figures influential upon the creation of the traditional Jit.

Chapter 5, “Three Strands of the (Contemporary Jit) Braid: The Jitterbugs, The Errol Flynn, and The Funkateers,” picks up from the previous chapter by weaving a synchronic braid between the Jit, and two other contemporaneous Detroit-based dances: the Errol Flynn and the Funkateer. Derived from participant interviews and archival sources, this chapter presents a fractured history that at the same bridges gaps in knowledge on the era between the traditional Jit and the contemporary Jit by revealing the associations and ruptures occurring between all three dance forms. This chapter argues that even with these oscillating complexities, this braided history represents a new a system of knowledge and aesthetics that was influential on the creation of the contemporary style of Jit in the 1980s.

Chapter 6, “The Contemporary Jit: Shuffling Through the Waves” begins with the premise that the contemporary Jit was born from the footwork movement called the shuffle, conceived by the Mad Dancers in the late 1970s—the crew who took the braid discussed in the previous chapter, to create a new style of Jit. This chapter constructs a partial diachronic history traversing across four generational waves in Detroit, including a fourth (virtual) wave of online communities. Pieced together through interviews, written texts, and archival material, this chapter presents various debates spanning across these generational waves of the Jit. I also address how mass-media may have affected the Jit culture, challenging Jit’s long-standing philosophy of remaining close to its original steps and the music form of techno. This chapter argues that despite these disputes and the infusion of other dance forms, one thread of agreement across all of the waves is nonetheless clear: what makes the Jit the *Jit*—is the shuffle.

Chapter 7, “Driving to ‘Stringz Spot’: Entering the Jit Cypher” presents clips of key moments of my fieldwork at Haleem “Stringz” Rasul’s bi-weekly practice sessions at the Cass Corridor Neighborhood Development Corporation (CCNDC) that connect back to ideas presented throughout this dissertation through the panorama of driving in and out of Detroit over three seasons of fieldwork. Framed by Deidre Sklar’s theory of “empathetic kinesthetic perception” (2001b), this chapter explains how my ways of being, seeing, and feeling contributed to understanding the Jit as a type of movement knowledge, that could not be gleaned through observation alone.

Chapter 8, “Conclusion: ‘Jit Hop’” is framed around the question of why hip hop culture has been able to migrate to all corners of the globe, whereas the Jit has hardly spread outside Detroit’s city limits. This chapter contemplates whether the Jit can leave Detroit and what happens when it does. Through interviews and written texts, I discuss resemblances between the two dance forms, the ways my participants connected the Jit to hip hop, and why they believe the Jit has not gone global. I address how Michael Smith’s dance collective Jit Masters and Mike Manson teaching master classes in La Paz, Bolivia complicate existing ideas about the Jit and provoke questions for future research.

CHAPTER II

LOOKING IN THE REARVIEW: DETROIT HISTORY SEEN THROUGH INDUSTRY AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Sitting in my car, driving very far
Driving all along, far away from home
Music's playing loud, a hundred-thirty miles
Stepping on the gas, accelerating very fast
My cosmic car
I wish I could escape from this crazy place
Fantasy or dream, I'll take anything
Suddenly surprised right before my eyes, all I see are stars
Colored by cosmic cars

—Cybotron “Cosmic Cars” (1982)

Made in Detroit

George Galster, author of *Driving Detroit: The Quest for Respect in Motown*, provocatively claims, “To understand Detroit, you must understand one thing: in its soul, it is a place that makes things—metal things” (2012, 3). Galster’s statement is indicative of Detroit’s automobile industry, established in the early 1900s, and how its process of mass-producing cars marked Detroit as North America’s “Motor City.” Galster connects the automobile industry with another Detroit-based product—Motown: “[F]orty years ago, Detroit also took the lead in making the ultimate auto accessory: driving music” (2012, 3). Founded by Berry Gordy in 1959, Motown was thought of as “Fordism in music” (Quispel 2005, 235) because the record label produced songs with the efficiency

of an assembly line, Motown was colloquially labeled as a hit-making “machine.”

Detroit’s foundational character is shaped by production, mechanization, and mass manufacturing, which has not only contributed to the fabrication of cars but also to music born in the city.

More than this, some authors go so far as to argue that Detroit is in fact the source of the American way of life. In *Detroit: An American Autopsy*, Charlie LeDuff claims “Detroit is Pax Americana. The birthplace of mass production, the automobile, the cement road, the refrigerator, frozen peas, high-paid blue-collar jobs, home ownership, and credit on a mass scale. America’s way of life was built here” (2014, 4). David Maraniss similarly suggests that “The story of Detroit was not just about the life and times of one city. The automobile, music, labor, civil rights, the middle class—so much of what defines our society and culture can be traced to Detroit, either made there or tested there or strengthened there” (2015, XII).

Contrary to people who would claim that Motown music could have developed anywhere, Suzanne E. Smith’s *Dancing in the Street: Motown and the Cultural Politics of Detroit* argues that the relationship between Motown and car manufacturing is not incidental but formative. Smith states, “Berry Gordy Jr.’s. decision to create a hit factory of popular song recordings was a complicated response to the history of African Americans in the automobile industry. Motown’s assembly line production style imitated the auto industry, while its product, music, stood apart from the city’s larger economy” (1999, 16). For Smith, place does indeed matter to the fuller understanding of historical narratives because it encapsulates how economics, politics, and environment shape a

specific culture's creative by-products or, in Detroit's case, a culture's music forms. Likewise, in the essay "Detroit, City of Cars, City of Music," Chris Quispel mirrors Smith's argument by claiming that Detroit's urban, industrial environment made the rise of Motown a real possibility. Smith goes on to suggest that the generalized narrative of Gordy achieving the American Dream does explain Motown's success to a certain extent but negates the importance and complexity of how Detroit and its race relations shaped the distinct ethos of these creative products.

Twenty years after Motown, Detroit's manufacturing environment influenced the birth of another musical movement, the underground electronic dance music of techno. The techno sound was decidedly neither pop nor Motown, but rather an underground philosophic sonic statement birthed from necessity and survival. The creators of techno produced music based on sounds that typified Detroit's dystopic environment in the eighties, which looked and sounded quite different from the prosperous Detroit at the height of the Motown era, which itself coincided with the height of automobile manufacturing in the early 1960s. However, techno's mechanized sounds were saturated with futurity and possibility, mobilizing a collective of kindred spirits in the wake of the city's imminent collapse.

Scott Martelle reminds us, however, that "You can't write about Detroit without writing about race, which has influenced the city's evolution as much as the city's shifting economic features" (2012, 35). By the late 1960s Detroit's auto industry was comprised of over a quarter of a million of African American workers (Georgakas et al. 2012, 28) and Motown, one of the first highly successful black-owned and operated

corporations in the United States, was contributing to desegregation efforts by bringing people together through music. Motown's contribution of a new soulful sound of America is generally well-known, which is different from Detroit techno. Despite techno's current association with white, European club kids, techno was founded by African American musicians and was initially disseminated by African American DJs and independent radio stations in the city. Detroit's culture, largely created by African American labor, ingenuity, and futuristic thinking has literally "moved" the world, through cars and music.

Fordism, Modernism, and the Arts

Henry Ford installed an assembly line in his Detroit automobile factory in 1913, inspired by previously invented processes already being implemented in the meatpacking and railroad car industries. This new form of mass-manufacturing greatly reduced the time required to build automobiles. For example, "the time required to produce a Model T dropped from 12.5 hours per car to five hours and 50 minutes" (Detroit Historical Museum). Ford's implementation of assembly line technology made possible the mass-production model of auto manufacturing, which achieved an unprecedented economy of scale in the industry. Moreover, assembly line manufacturing occasioned a change in compensation and working hours, but also hiring practices. The new five-dollar per hour/eight-hour workday initiative was implemented regardless of race. Prior to 1913, "blacks were hardly welcome" at the Ford Motor Company, whose hiring practices until then had largely favored people of European descent (George 2003, 7). Ford's 1913 initiative was a key factor in the "Great Migration," which drew a considerable number

of African Americans formerly working as sharecroppers in the South to the automobile industry in Detroit.

Fordism is aptly named after Henry Ford, who did not invent the car but created technologies to mass-produce them. In the broadest sense, Fordism has been historically emblematic of the mass manufacturing of automobiles, “based on moving assembly line techniques operated with the semi-skilled labor of the mass worker,” which essentially produces large quantities of cars at lower operational costs (Amin 1994, 9). As a business model, Fordism utilized vertical integration, which in economic terms refers to the top-down model of business where the company controls and owns its own business subsidiaries. Fordism produced large quantities of a standardized design (Gramsci 2000, 275), and implemented a push system, based on predicted consumer demand, and then created a production schedule while accumulating the necessary parts to fabricate the automobile. However, William J. Cameron argues that Fordism, as a manufacturing principle, is not simply predicated on quantity production or machine production, but is concerned with the “principles of power, accuracy, economy, system, continuity, and speed” (quoted in Batchelor 1994, 4-5), revealing the complexity of the Fordist model. Moreover, Fordism can be characterized as “the age of ‘intensive accumulation’ with ‘monopolistic regulation’ of the economy” (Amin 1994, 9).

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Detroit’s economy was prosperous, largely due to the success of the automobile industry. By 1915, more than 125 companies replicated the Fordist model by fabricating cars in the Detroit area and other local businesses built the engines, tires, and other automobile components for the

major car manufacturers (Detroit Historical Museum). Between 1900 and 1930, Detroit's population rapidly increased, and it became "[North] America's second-fastest growing city and its fifth largest metropolitan area" (George 2003, 7). This growth was fueled by the auto industry, which by 1929 was the largest and fastest developing industry in the United States (ibid). Detroit was at the nucleus of North America's industrial manufacturing boom during the postwar years. "The Big Three" Detroit-based auto companies, Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler, dominated the global production of automobiles. By 1950, due to the vast amount of available employment in the automobile industry and the worker benefits gained by the collective bargaining of the United Auto Workers Union, the metropolitan Detroit area had the highest median income and highest rate of home ownership of any major US city (Galster 2012, 6).

As Detroit's automobile industry continued to grow, so did an emerging car culture supported by new businesses that began to line Detroit's main roads. In the early 1950s, "drive-in movies theaters, drive-through stores, and restaurants eliminated the need for motorists to leave their cars. Cars changed the way Detroiters looked at their town. Main transportation corridors, like Woodward, Michigan, and Gratiot Avenues, became both commerce centers and social venues" (Detroit Historical Museum). Detroit's developing car culture also had a social component as "cruising" (driving as a form of entertainment) on the city's avenues described in the Introduction became a popular social activity for teenagers. For Detroiters, Sunday became synonymous with the car as families would venture out on "Sunday Drives" to explore the city and beyond to Detroit's suburbs (Detroit Historical Museum).

The era of modernism emerged approximately at the same time as Fordism in the early 1900s, with modernism functioning as a social response that attributed “profound significance to [Fordist] mass production” (Batchelor 1994, ix). Modernism, an artistic and philosophical movement, placed emphasis on scientific and rational thinking, the importance of the autonomous self, and universal master narratives that offered totalizing explanations on history, science, and culture. The Fordist holistic approach to manufacturing cars is comparable to the modernist sensibility of universal thinking, as vertical integration and standardization both imply a universal system, where parts and laborious tasks were easily interchangeable and homogenized. The form and function of the machine, referred to as machine-age aesthetics, became a model for modern thought and visual expression.

Machine-age aesthetics found beauty in the mechanized by-product of function and its utilitarian, streamlined form of fleeting images, power, speed, repetition, precision, efficiency, and rhythmic flow, mirroring the Fordist philosophy of manufacturing (Chase 1929, 250). This reverence for the machine was depicted visually by modern artists such as Frances Picabia, Marcel Duchamp, Charles Sheerler, and Diego Rivera (Jameson 1991, 35) and by modern dance choreographers such as Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and Merce Cunningham (McCarren 2003, 35). Their various interpretations of machine-age aesthetics provided a diverse iconography that celebrated the emergence of industrialization.

Modernism placed significant emphasis on the importance of compartmentalizing one’s psychological and geographical spaces from the detriments of physical labor and

also conceived new conceptions of time and space. Time was no longer regulated by only biological and agricultural processes but was now subject to the regulation of the assembly line, stopwatch technology, and the exactitude of the employee punch-in clock. Modern ideas of time and space were considered linear and developmental, mirroring the technological inventions of the train, automobile, and telephone that reduced the amount of time needed to travel vast distances (Gartman 1998, 123).

In *Swinging the Machine: Modernity, Technology, and African American Culture between the World Wars*, Joel Dinerstein examines the impact that modernity and the machine age had on all aspects of time, work, and American culture, notably the tempo of everyday lives.³ Dinerstein connects the large-scale industrialization of Fordism to social dance noting that the manufacturing boom of the 1930s and “the overwhelming roar of machine-driven factories” provided Lindy hop dancers “the opportunity to *get with the noise*” (2003, 6). Dinerstein argues, “[F]actory work itself was part and parcel of the disruptions of modernity, affecting the human body through noise, machine rhythms, repetitive motion, and, a lack of autonomy” (2003, 42). As an effect, humans needed to make sense of and find the beauty within these industrial environments (2003, 44).

³ Modernity refers to a historical period, defined as various times during the late-nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, depending on the geographical location. Modernity was shaped by the development of industrialization and capitalism, resulting in a socio-cultural attitude shaped by “modern” ways of rationale thinking such as time and production as being progressive (Batchelor 1994, ix) and the need to separate disciplines such as science and politics (McCarren 2003, 39). In contrast, modernism is a cultural and philosophical movement, visible in various art forms, including but not limited to visual arts, architecture, and dance (Baudelaire 2010, Wilson 1998, McCarren 2003). The definition of modernism across these art forms, and the time period associated with it, do not neatly line up with each other, nor with modernity.

Dinerstein posits that swing music and dance complicated the ideology of the dancing automaton as they “humanized the cold, rational machine-world created and fetishized by technical, corporate, and even artistic elites in the early twentieth century” (2003, 28).⁴

Felicia McCarren argues that machine-age aesthetics and modernist ideas of time and space specifically impacted dance and the dancing body. In *Dancing Machines: Choreographies of the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, she identifies two types of modern dancing machines: the automaton and the human motor. The first model, aligned with mechanics, is interested in gestures that hide the work or agency behind it, whereas the second model, aligned with thermodynamics, functions by “redefining the labor around it” (2003, 11). According to McCarren, “The dancing machine represents both an idealization of the body’s performative prowess and a critique of its mechanization” (2003, 9). The automaton’s virtuosity is determined by external forces and its movement is only possible due to the concealment of its own work. This is the paradox of the automaton—through its own virtuosity, it conceals the work it requires to be a virtuoso. Whereas the automaton hides its labor and agency (2003, 14), human motor functions by

⁴ To elucidate this point, Dinerstein notes the historical instance of Henry Ford reaching out to the American public and asking for their solidarity in forsaking jazz and modern dances in a supposed attempt to revitalize traditional European social dances. This reveals a paradox in Ford’s vision of modernity. While he might be seen as radical in terms of mass production and consumption, he was simultaneously anti-modernist and conservative within the cultural realm of the upper-class elites.

its own free will with its cosmic energy condensed into one body powering “the universe with a single pair of arms and legs” (2003, 11).

A couple of decades later, the machinic made its way from the body of a laborer into the rhythms and sounds of popular music. Berry Gordy, founder of Motown, worked on the assembly line for two years before he got into music. In his autobiography, Gordy writes, “Little did I know when I started how important to my future that assembly line was going to be. There was a pleasing simplicity to how everyone did the same thing over and over again” (1994, 189). This monotony and repetition enabled Gordy to write melodies while working on the assembly line:

Since I had no piano, I had to devise another method of writing. I used “Mary Had A Little Lamb,” the simplest song I could think of, to form the basis to remember song ideas in my head. I gave each note or tone of the scale a number from one to seven. “Mary Had a Little Lamb turned out to be 3212333-222-355-32123333-22321... Working fast up the slow-moving line, getting ahead of myself, I had time to rush back to my station and write down the numbers that corresponded with my new ideas. How wonderful—getting paid for a real job and composing songs at the same time. (1994, 70)

While Gordy was methodically fastening upholstery and chrome strips to automobile frames at the Lincoln-Mercury plant, the motions, sounds, and rhythms of the assembly line influenced some of Hitsville U.S.A.’s most successful early records, such as Barrett Strong’s “Money (That’s What I Want),” co-written by Gordy, which came in second on Billboard’s R&B chart in 1960. Tire chains were utilized to “create the gritty backbeat of songs such as Martha and the Vandellas’ ‘Nowhere to Run’” (Smith 1999, 15).

For Gordy, manufacturing principles became an all-inclusive framework for Motown’s success. Not only were the sounds of the songs influenced by the assembly

line, Motown's production processes were as well. Gordy applied the production principles he learned at Lincoln-Mercury to the process of generating hit records and creating crossover recording artists, equating the process of building to cars to the process of building successful recording artists. His recording studio Hitsville U.S.A. functioned as a metaphorical assembly line, where raw talent could be polished and manufactured into stardom. He said, "I wanted a place where a kid off the street could walk in one door an unknown and come out another a recording artist—a star" (1999, 140). Even the name of his company was influenced by the auto industry. By taking Detroit's moniker, the "Motor City" and replacing "city" with "town," Gordy came up with "Motown" (1990, 211).

By the end of the 1960s, the Motown label was thriving, however, Detroit's industrial climate began to decline, as well as its state of race relations. In 1967, Detroit's infamous race riots/uprising occurred, which contributed to dividing the black and white populations in the city (George 2003, 149).⁵ In light of the racial tensions occurring in Detroit and civil rights and black power movements more broadly, African Americans working on the assembly lines at the Chrysler Dodge main plant formed an autoworker union titled the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, which was commonly known as DRUM. This union sought to collectively speak for African American laborers whose

⁵ The Detroit Riots are also known as the Detroit Rebellion/Uprising of '67. The contributing factors are far too complex to detail, however the confrontation between residents of predominately African American neighborhoods and the city's police department began in July 1967 and lasted for approximately five days, sparked by issues of civil rights' injustices and racism.

voices were not being heard by the automobile industry and by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union (Smith 2003, 4).

The decade of the 1970s saw the “crisis of Fordism,” which is attributable to broader social, economic, and cultural factors such as the slow-down of economic growth in the United States, the practice of outsourcing, and the oil embargo sanctioned by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which denied the export of oil to any country who provided financial or military support to Israel. With this sanction, the United States went into an economic recession, which greatly affected Detroit since the price of gas skyrocketed to unprecedented rates, prompting people to purchase smaller, more fuel-efficient cars. Moreover, stricter environmental regulations and the entrance of foreign automobile companies into the North American car market compromised the industry’s profit margin. In an effort to cut costs, the industry made changes such as moving manufacturing plants to other communities or states where labor unions were not as strong and the cost of doing business was therefore cheaper. All of these factors together led to the deindustrialization of Detroit, which resulted in the loss of skilled (and well-paid) labor positions and an escalating unemployment rate.

To add insult to injury, in 1972 Berry Gordy moved his Motown empire to Los Angeles, California. Gordy officially signed with the MCS record label in Los Angeles and as a result, most of the creative and logistical control over the sound and production of records was handed over to the label’s executives (George 2003, 202). On the move of Motown, Nelson George lamented, “[S]ince its move to Los Angeles, Motown has had moments of glory, but the magic of the production line has been lost, discarded, or

buried” (2003, 202). Back in Detroit, Gordy’s decision had an unsettling effect on the morale of the city’s residents, magnifying the looming consequences of the changing auto industry and deindustrialization.

Post-Fordism, Postmodernism, and a Culture of Deindustrialization

What is at stake in the transition from Fordism to post-Fordism is “the putative transition from one dominant phase of capitalist development in the post-war period to another thirty to fifty-year cycle of development based upon very different economic, societal, and political norms” (Amin 1994, 3). As an inherent component of this economic shift, the terms “deindustrialization” and “postindustrial” denote how, when, and why cities like Detroit lost their manufacturing industry. Amin describes deindustrialization as “the loss of economic activities and functions to other regions of the world” (1994, 81), whereas postindustrial refers to an epoch shaped by the transition from a mass manufacturing economy to a service-based economy (Gartman 1998, 120). More specifically, “blue-collar” manufacturing jobs were largely replaced by service positions, or no jobs at all.

Another factor in the transition from Fordism to the post-Fordist model was the growing power of the consumer. Specifically, new consumer tastes had evolved and multiplied, and their demands sought varieties of goods, which conflicted with the Fordist model of standardization (Amin 1994, 10). In post-Fordist manufacturing, it was no longer advantageous or possible to mass-produce standardized models of cars, for example, based on predicted demand. Instead, automobiles were produced through methods of mass-customization, based on consumer request.

Post-Fordist horizontal integration moved away from the Fordist top-down model by instilling a networked system of bottom-up commerce that functioned by outsourcing to the new global market. This horizontal system and its newly developed “lean-manufacturing” methods diminished the vast amounts of inventory and stock the Fordist model required to mass-produce cars. Post-Fordism ushered in the implementation of the pull system, which once the product had been designed, the necessary inventory for building the car is “pulled” through the system, resulting in timely output with no surplus inventory. At the same time, in the name of efficiency, assembly line technology was transitioned to automated robotic technology, eliminating the need for skilled human labor.

The transition to post-Fordism decimated Detroit. Although the transition itself took the better part of two decades, the economic impact was felt in Detroit by the early 1980s.⁶ By the mid 1980s, the city’s unemployment rate was thirty-six percent, compared to the national rate of six to seven percent (Zurkin 1991,105). More specifically, “between 1979 and 1984, fifty percent of black males employed by manufacturers of durable goods in large industrial cities (including Detroit),” lost their employment (Lipsitz 2007, 251). Detroit’s decline was exhibited in its many empty factories, abandoned automobile assembly plants, and a plethora of burnt, vacant houses.

⁶ For example, by the year 2005, seventy-seven smaller Michigan-based auto subsidiary companies had been reduced to twenty-seven, and only nineteen of the one hundred twenty nationally-based companies that supplied parts to General Motors and Ford, remained in the United States (Galster 2012, 127).

Various scholars have conceptualized the era of post-Fordism by marking its connections to postmodernism. For example, post-Fordism is associated with economic and institutional change, whereas postmodernism is linked with “change in the arena of consumption, aesthetics, culture, and lifestyle. However, for observers concerned with the totality of change today, not only are the two arenas representative of a single, overarching transition, they are also inseparable” (Amin 1994, 30) Sally Banes contends that modern dance’s proclivity for abstraction was challenged by the advent of postmodern dance’s insertion of reflexivity (1994, 305), reflective of postmodernism’s change of aesthetics that blurred the line between high and low culture. Postmodern dance moves away from modern dance and its master narrative methods of storytelling by focusing of the body and movement, themselves, through deconstruction, minimalism, and interdisciplinarity, notably through the work of the Judson Church group and Anna Halprin (302).

Generally, the argument follows that moving from Fordist standardized mass production to post-Fordist customized flexible production had a cultural impact that fostered a new sensibility tied to the temporal and spatial changes occurring within global manufacturing practices. David Harvey describes the transition to post-Fordism as such: “Speed up was achieved in production by organizational shifts towards vertical disintegration—subcontracting, outsourcing, etc. — that reversed the Fordist tendency towards vertical integration and produced an increasing roundaboutness in production even in the face of increasing financial centralization” (1989, 284). Post-Fordism produced at much faster, efficient speeds, subsequently diminishing physical space. The

shift from standardized mass production to diverse production created a new sensibility that not only dramatically changed one's relationship to time and space, but also created a postmodern "ahistorical sense of meaningless flux" (1989, 125), which was in direct opposition to the modernist idea of time as progressive.⁷ While I do not agree with Jameson's assessment of postmodernism as ahistorical, what I find useful about his formulation here is that his idea of the fragmented self echoes the Post-Fordist operational move from top-down operations to systems of bottom-up commerce that function by outsourcing, or detaching from the main source of operations, to compete in global markets.

Fredric Jameson refers to postmodernism as the new "cultural logic of capitalism," arguing that its ethos is not just bound in style and aesthetics, but informed by a fragmented image culture, the detachment of the individual, and a loss of one's connection to history. As an example, when one experiences time through an ahistorical sense of meaningless flux, without being grounded by psychological, historical, and/or geographical mapping mechanisms, the self becomes fragmented. The more one becomes fragmented or "schizophrenic" (Jameson 1991, 28), the more estranged one becomes from her or his own identity and its relationship to the world. The ramifications of post-Fordism rendered a schizophrenic self that was decentered and fragmented.

⁷ Jameson has been critiqued for his ideas on postmodernism and it being ahistorical (Gartman 1998).

Jameson argues postmodernism blurs the line between realism and subjectivity, which functions through consumption and commodification. As an example, Jameson uses Van Gogh's painting *A Pair of Boots* to exemplify how modernism embodies reality, where Andy Warhol's work *Diamond Dust Shoes* exemplifies a postmodern superficiality and a loss of subjectivity. Jameson also describes how the Bonaventure Hotel in Los Angeles illustrates postmodernity's detachment from history. He explains that the hotel represents the need to create a new world, as it is a structure discernably detached from its immediate surroundings and history. The aesthetics of the architecture also reveals the prevailing ideology behind the structure of the hotel; its details reflect the global market of corporations, consumption, and the fragmented nature of postmodernism and Post-Fordism. bell hooks (1990) offers an important corrective to these theories, cautioning that postmodernism had been constructed through a white male, Euro-American sensibility, which denied not only the place or consideration of blackness in postmodernity, but the opportunity for black scholars to contribute to the discussion as well. hook's theory is applicable to the narrative on techno's origins that generally most people are familiar with: techno was born in Europe and created by white men.

The post-Fordist era also ushered in a new kind of embodied relationship between industry and aesthetics. In the article "The Labors of Michael Jackson: Virtuosity, Deindustrialization, and Dancing Work," dance scholar Judith Hamera connects the dance aesthetics of one of the greatest pop-icons of our time, Michael Jackson, to the human motor within the climate of deindustrialization. She argues, "Jackson's virtuosic activation of the human motor offered a fantasy of unalienated labor in an industrial

modernity that was and never was” (2012, 763). Hamera contends that Jackson, as a virtuoso performer, fought against the romanticized notion that his dancing abilities were “natural.” As a human motor, Jackson’s dancing transcended the relationship between virtuosity and work because his movements were not seen as hard labor (2012, 760). Felicia McCarren examines the effects of such transcendence, saying “[W]hereas the mechanical automata gave a face to the problems of human agency, the power of mind over body, concealed work and the mystery of the ‘automatic,’ the motor concretized the problem of perpetual movement” (2003, 15). Here, applying the idea of perpetual movement to Jackson implies an embodied quality not gained from labor and refinement but from being naturally gifted with super-human abilities, an idea Hamera contends he was dancing against. Through the hard labor of dancing, Jackson recasts the trope of the human motor by producing a yearning for Fordist mechanization and the industrial environment he grew up in: the steel-mill town of Gary, Indiana, which shares a trajectory similar to Detroit’s deindustrialization (Hamera 2012, 761).

In the early 1980s, as the automobile industry was continuing to wane, the electronic music genre of techno surfaced in Belleville, Michigan, a rural suburb located thirty miles beyond the city limits of Detroit. The African American architects of techno—Juan Atkins “the Initiator,” Kevin Saunderson “the Elevator,” and Derrick May “the Innovator,” collectively known as the “Belleville Three”—were all born in the early 1960s when the city of Detroit, its economy, and the “Motown sound” were booming. Other notable artists who contributed to the creation of techno include Eddie “Flashin” Fowlkes, whose turntablist abilities motivated Kevin Saunderson to learn the craft of

DJing, and DJ Ken Collier, who was a pioneer of producing and turntablism in Detroit (Lipsitz 2007, 244).

The prosperous auto industry of the 1950s influenced the sound of techno by cultivating a pervasive taste for all-things-European within Detroit's youth culture of the 1980s.⁸ These DJs belonged to a generation who grew up in a middle class that fetishized elements of European culture, such as haute couture and the robotic sounds of the German synthband Kraftwerk, which influenced the electro sound of techno.⁹

Beyond the European influences of high-culture and funky robots, these DJs also created techno as a response to the dystopic state of the city as a means to offer hope and salvage the city of Detroit. DJ Mike Huckaby affirms this sentiment by stating "you can hear the climate of Detroit in the music" (Thump 2013). The climate of Detroit went from the "US Capital of Automobiles" in the 1950s to the "US Capital of Homicide" in the 1980s. May, of the Belleville Three, remarks on the city during the 1980s in the following lament:

Reagan was president, it was a fucked up time. Detroit was all fucked up, depressed, people out of work, a lot of young black men in jail for shit they didn't do. I didn't have any money, didn't really have any particular vision or goal. It made me angry. It made me passionate to a point where the shit came out in the

⁸ During this time, there was a division of economic class between the youth in Detroit, referred to as the "preps" and the "jits." Like the Belleville Three, the preps, from the Northwest side of Detroit, were accustomed to this higher standard of living as the youth there were of middle-class status. The "jits" were 'streetified' and 'hip' and "generally less affluent than the preps" (Sicko 1999, 14). Sicko explains that the name jits came from the "frenetic dance, presumably descended from the 1930s jitterbug" (55), which is not the case, as is discussed in Chapter Four.

⁹ Derrick May often refers to Detroit techno as "hi tech soul." May describes the sound as a fusion of Europhilia and Funk, likening it to "George Clinton and Kraftwerk stuck in an elevator," with only a sequencer to keep them company (Lipsitz 2007, 246).

music. Making reference to what kind of future we might have. You know, shit like that, making reference to somehow saving the world. (Brewster 2012, 139)

As a movement, these DJs were not interested in creating music that provided only entertainment, but rather in offering a sonic statement that not only criticized the deteriorating state of Detroit but also presented a remixed vision of a utopic future.

As an example, Juan Atkins' song "Cosmic Cars" reflected the techno movement's futuristic vision of a utopic universe, where vehicles had the ability to instantaneously teleport to a limitless "betwixt and between" cyberspace. On "Cosmic Cars" Atkins stated, "I envisioned being in a car and driving on the highway, and all of a sudden just taking off and going into space" (Glasspiegel 2012). He continues, "because there are times that you can be in a city like Detroit and it can get really bad. You just want to fly away. Sometimes you wish you could just sail off to another time and space" (ibid). "Cosmic Cars" references a transitional space, existing somewhere between Detroit's vacant shell and outer space, similar to techno's objective of creating "a world that wasn't there" (Watten 1997, 85), by sonically producing new cognitive and spatial mappings, enacting an innovative identification of Detroit—an identification that encompassed the present and a brighter future of the city (Lipsitz 2007, 253).

The inception of techno was not only influenced by the city's dystopic environment but also inspired by the new sounds of robotic automation radiating from automobile factories and the drone of traffic emanating from freeway I-96, located in downtown Detroit (Lipsitz 2007, 242). Like the assembly line's relation to Motown

decades earlier, automation influenced the underlying philosophy that shaped aspects of the electronic music of techno.

Detroit's deindustrialization "produced systematic economic and cultural disenfranchisement" (Lipsitz 2007, 241) and the Belleville Three were keenly aware of the economy's far-reaching effects on Detroit. According to Lipsitz, Atkins said in an interview that his music "owed more to the robots who have taken the places of workers on the Ford assembly line than it did to the legacy of Berry Gordy and Motown Records" (2007, 244). Similarly, Benjamin Noys argues techno's futuristic sounds aimed to erase the Fordist-influenced sound of Motown by mimicking the streamlined sounds of automation "that had displaced remains of variable capital (humans) for constant capital (machines) at Ford" (2014, 52). To be clear, the techno movement was not an attempt to break away from the Motown tradition, or a "rejection of an African American heritage," but rather an attempt to make sense of Detroit's postindustrial environment through music (Lipsitz 2007, 142).

Most of techno's musical composition relied on driving, syncopated rhythms, rather than melody or lyrics, comparable to non-Western polyrhythmic musical forms. Second wave Detroit techno DJ and music producer Jeff Mills, aka "The Wizard," defines the techno sound as "everything you haven't imagined yet" (Revolution for Change). Amalgamating sounds that encapsulated funky intergalactic American beats, and aloof, European synth, and disembodied talking robots, the Belleville Three created a new sound that exemplified Detroit's dystopic, postindustrial environment.

Post-Bankruptcy: Jitting in/and the “Ruins”

In 2008, the international automobile market was severely affected by the global financial downturn with the United States being hit the hardest, necessitating a government bailout for Chrysler and General Motors (Apel 2015, 121). The ramifications of the global economic crisis as well as the city’s overall debt of \$18 billion affected Detroit’s economic state, causing the city to file for Chapter 9 bankruptcy on June 18, 2013 (2015, 123).

When the city filed for bankruptcy, it became known in the media as the “dead zone,” as it could no longer function without the injection of federally sanctioned fiscal “life support.” As a result, Detroit became the seminal example of what a deindustrialized “slow death” of a once great North American city looks like—figuratively and aesthetically. This is illustrated in the way that Detroit became the locus of the photographic genre of deindustrial ruin imagery, in which professional and amateur photographers present glossy, sophisticated photos of Detroit’s uninhabited spaces. As some examples, Yves Marchand and Roman Meffe’s *The Ruins of Detroit* (2014), presents images of various abandoned automobile plants, while Andrew Moore and Philip Levine’s coffee table photo book *Detroit Disassembled* (2010) presents images of an abandoned school science laboratory, complete with unbroken glass beakers and Bunsen burners, disheveled and disregarded manufacturing plants, and other vacant structures left alone for so long that green moss grew perversely into interior spaces. These images are also referred to as “ruin porn.” Such photos became a highly fetishized commodity by voyeurs drawn to images depicting modern-day ruins. Ruin imagery offers

fetishized visual “evidence” of these colloquialisms because in almost every photograph the indication of human life is missing from the landscape.

In addition to these well-known images, an excess of academic articles, books, and news stories have examined the social and economic factors contributing to Detroit’s “fatality” and its current state of ruination. Nevertheless, many sources (prematurely) diagnosed the city of Detroit as deceased, beyond resuscitation, largely based on statistical information detailing the historical decline of the population in the city. Quantitative analyses of Detroit’s waning population tell only one side of the story. However, statistics and images of ruins ignore the fact that both before and after Detroit declared bankruptcy hundreds of thousands of people continued to reside in the greater Detroit area and negotiated, in innovative, sometimes artistic ways, how to make sense of Detroit’s deindustrialized landscape and the commonly held assumption that Detroit was already dead.

In the text, *Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline* (2015), Dora Apel examines Detroit’s postindustrial environment, specifically the city’s living ruins, which consist of many abandoned buildings, houses, warehouses, and obsolete plants. Between the financial meltdown of 2008 and Detroit’s filing for bankruptcy in 2013, disaster photography became synonymous with Detroit. These images, in video and in print, present the disappeared Detroit through the notion of a failed industrial utopia by capturing an oxymoronic poetic beauty, or what Apel calls “beautiful terrible ruins,” in the vacant manufacturing plants and houses scattered throughout the city (2012, 55). The shared common denominator of these images is the missing presence of human life.

Apel argues that the photographic genre of ruin imagery offers fetishized imageries of Detroit's postindustrial landscape. Apel states, "Ruin imagery makes visible the effects of capitalist deindustrialization in ways that might otherwise remain invisible" (2015, 100). She explains that Detroit's ruination is paradoxical in nature. Simultaneously beautiful and terrible, the ruins help people cope with the ramifications of postindustrial failure as the anxiety surrounding the city's decline feeds an appetite for ruin imagery (55).

The process of Detroit's ruination, which has largely been attributed to deindustrialization, is more complicated than it may appear at a first glance. The representation of these living ruins and scarcity of human life are important for the ways in which images reveal or obscure hierarchies of power. Apel states, "Detroit has become the preeminent example of urban decay, the global metaphor for the current state of neoliberal capitalist culture, and the epicenter of the photographic genre of deindustrial ruin imagery" (2015, 30). Photographic representations of Detroit's ruination do not explain the complex causes, beyond deindustrialization, that contributed to the decline of the city, such as, the pervasive police brutality stemming from the race-relations uprising in 1967 that contributed to marking Detroit as one of the most racially segregated cities in the U.S. Instead, these photographs offer representations of the city that can be used to serve different political agendas. Ruin imagery "obscures the ongoing crisis of poverty and unemployment" (2015, 75), in that human bodies are generally not represented within these images. The lack of human presence points to ruin imagery's insistence on reinforcing the idea that Detroit transitioned from a Fordist boomtown to a Post-Fordist

ghost town to a Post-Post-Apocalyptic wasteland, beyond revival. This trope romanticizes the defunct ephemeral spaces of Fordism and then relegates the apparatus of deindustrialization as responsible for removing the human presence from the city of Detroit. However, according to Apel, in 2015, almost 700,000 people still resided in Detroit (2015, 76).

Presenting imagery that fetishizes postindustrial Detroit's vacant spaces reveals two different narratives: one longing for the deafening roar of Fordist mass manufacturing to return to Detroit; and conversely, one waiting for these abandoned spaces to be used innovatively (Apel 2015, 76). The missing human presence in both narratives negates the real ramifications decay and desertion had upon human life in Detroit.

I now turn to Detroit-based dance artist Brandon Hobbs, aka "Jittin' Jesus" and his ten-part YouTube video series (what he refers to as his ten commandments), titled *Jittin' Has Risen*. In the series, Hobbs performs the Jit in many of Detroit's abandoned industrial spaces. Unlike ruin porn, however, he contends that *Jittin' Has Risen* was "more than just a title of this project. It was more like a prophetic look into the future of the Jit culture" in Detroit (Control Detroit 2013). Through choreographic analysis and Dora Apel's theories on the effects of deindustrial ruin imagery, I argue that Hobbs' embodied intervention complicates the construction of the ruins-of-Detroit trope and the city's grim diagnosis by representing the survival of the underground Jit culture, established over forty years ago. In the video, *JITTIN HAS RISEN STEP 8*:

GRATITUDE,¹⁰ published on July 18, 2013, the same day Detroit filed for bankruptcy, Hobbs's mediation offers an example of the relational forces occurring between Detroit's deindustrialized environment and the human presence that did indeed remain in the city. Further, by Jitting through the city's abandoned postindustrial spaces, Hobbs' virtuosic footwork offers a contemporary example revealing another collision between Detroit's deindustrialization and cultural production.

The opening scene reveals a seemingly vacant building replete with graffiti-speckled walls and a heap of long-forgotten industrialized rubble within an outdoor passageway of a defunct structure. Hobbs enters the long, narrow corridor. Running emphatically towards the camera he abruptly stops and positions himself next to the pile of debris. A quick-cut edit transposes the view of the camera to the floor where a close-up shot captures Hobbs's lightning-fast footwork on the wet, or perhaps oil-slicked floor. The camera cuts back to an eye-level view that reveals his laboring body producing efficient movements of his feet and arms, moving succinctly in tandem. An ethereal white presence dances with Hobbs. Fog or perhaps car exhaust sporadically traverses the space in front and behind him. In the far distance, fragments of life in the form of moving automobiles and trucks are perceptible as they travel amid the open spaces between the building's concrete pillars. As the movements of his solo accelerate, he contends with his own capacity for maximum production in relation to the efficiency of the post-Fordist machine.

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fx3iGTezyFw> Dance sequence begins at 1:13.

By visually alluding to the motor engine oil-soaked floor, the pile of industrial remains, and lingering automobile exhaust smoke, this scene reveals tangible reminders of elements that once fueled the mega-machine of Fordism in Detroit, nostalgic artifacts belonging to a bygone era. Set within the ruins that Fordism left behind, Hobbs's virtuosic footwork complicates the notion that the mechanism of post-Fordism and even Detroit's entrance into bankruptcy, is powerful enough to eradicate the relevance of Detroit's human presence.

Jittin' Ain't Dead not only complicates Detroit's grim diagnosis of certain death but also challenges the automaton that is devoid of agency and externally powered by punch-in-clock regulations of modernist time. As a super-human motor, Hobbs conceals the operation of the machine working to surpass the speed of global capital that left Detroit behind. His singular style of hyper-speed footwork pushes against the dehumanizing function of the machine, credited for exiling the soul and craft of hard work, characteristics that were once emblematic of Detroit's auto-worker class. Hobbs prophetically looks into the future of Detroit, presumably streaked in dystopic tones, while wistfully glancing backwards at nostalgic artifacts from the heyday of Detroit. Hobbs Jits through these abandoned spaces with efficiency and speed but remains planted in Detroit, presenting an example of the relational forces occurring between deindustrialized Detroit, its cultural production, and the human presence that still remains in the city. Indeed, this dissertation is dedicated to replacing the imagined empty ruins of Detroit with the sweating, virtuosic bodies of Jitters, the loud beats of their music, and the

well-traveled streets and halls where they congregate to dance, compete, and continue to construct the postindustrial city through hard (foot) work.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY: ETHNOGRAPHY

It's an invitation across the nation,
A chance for folks to meet.
There'll be laughing, singing, and music swinging,
Dancing in the street.
Philadelphia, P.A.
Baltimore and D.C. Now...
Can't forget the Motor City!

—Martha and the Vandellas, “Dancing in the Streets” (1964)

This chapter explains the methodological processes, tools, procedures, and ethical practices implemented for my dissertation research on the Jit. The structure of this chapter tracks chronologically, revealing the initial research design proposed for my dissertation, the research statement of purpose, the rationale behind the research design, a brief literature review of dance ethnographies, and the analytic questions that guided the scope of this study. The second section of this chapter offers a description of the data collection methodologies I employed, the basis for selecting them, ethical considerations that arose during data collection, and scholarly sources that guided the data collection. The third section of this chapter focuses on the methods of data analysis I employed, the sources guiding how I analyzed the data, and a discussion of the data analysis process, including themes and questions that emerged from the data. The last section of this

chapter outlines my positionality as a researcher, and ethical issues that I considered before and during my course of fieldwork in Detroit.

Research Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this ethnographic study is to explore the culture of the Detroit-based street dance, the Jit, through the practices and voices of past and current Jit dancers. This study will use ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and interviews alongside movement analysis of video recordings of the Jit and the examination of archival materials. This research fills a gap in the dance studies literature on street dance and will contribute to a growing body of literature on Detroit's cultural production.

A Detour to Detroit's Archives

As mentioned in the Introduction, searching for published materials on the Jit commenced before beginning my course of doctoral studies at Texas Woman's University. Because of the lack of scholarship on the dance form, I largely focused on the Jit's connection to Detroit techno because that was the only scholarly material I could center theoretical arguments on. However, the *actual* research process began in 2017 in Detroit.

Before I engaged in fieldwork with participants of the Jit culture, I visited the E. Azalia Collection at the Detroit Public Library to examine the Motown Archive, the Detroit Electronic Music Archive (DEMA), and the Detroit Dance Archive. The following field note narrates my (futile) experience of searching for the dancing body in these archives:

Sitting in a noiseless, stately room at the Detroit Public Library, a bronze statue of Abraham Lincoln peers over me as I meticulously comb through the archives. The plaque underneath his feet reads: “Let man be free.” In a parallel universe, this week in the United States, statues of confederate leaders are being dismantled in various locations in the South and a large anti-white nationalist protest occurred in Virginia, leaving one woman dead. The movie *Detroit* is showing in theatres and Detroiters have strong opinions on why they won't see the movie. Some are boycotting because people who were witness to the 1967 riots/uprising were not utilized for the film—voices that are still present in the city, today.

Sifting through the numerous folders in the Motown Archive, I found nothing on the dances of Motown. However, I did find: various American Airlines invoices detailing the Four Tops and the Miracles flight expenses; Stevie Wonder's trust account deposit slip book; recording session schedules with The Funk Brothers at the Hitsville U.S.A. recording studio; expense reports detailing how much the Supremes had spent on hotels, food, and travel expenses; numerous handwritten correspondences; and untouched photographs of Berry Gordy, Stevie Wonder, and Diana Ross.

The smell of the paper, dating back to the 1960s, contained a strong mildew scent with notes of dust. The handwriting was gorgeously complete in cursive, written in ink with no visible mistakes and the invoices were produced on typewriters. Although these individual artifacts are not wholly conducive for this research, cumulatively, they detail a philosophical and technological divide between Motown and techno, between labor and machines. Motown is analog, whereas techno is digital. The Motown sound was mass-produced, like Detroit's automobiles, and its distinctive soul-sound was scrutinized and refined through measures of quality control. Techno sought to insert soul back into the machine. As stimulating as these connections are —the dancing (Motown) body is missing from this archive.

The Detroit Electronic Music Archive (DEMA) was relatively small, consisting of three boxes of archival material. The earliest club flier in the archive dated back to the 1980s, however the years of 2001-2003 seemed to be the peak of the techno/house/electro club scene in Detroit. Most of the fliers had a similar aesthetic: minimal, industrial, esoteric, underground, and futuristic, printed in muted colors with matte and glossy finishes, some were even hand written. There were only a few fliers that mentioned dance, such as hip-hop battles, however, I found nothing

related to the Jit. The closest was ghattotech parties, with DJ Assault and DJ Godfather spinning.¹¹ Again, the dancing (Jitting) body is missing from this archive.

The last archive I examined was the Detroit Dance Archive. The folders consisted of newspaper clippings, mostly published in the *New York Times* and *Detroit Free Press*, with writing on choreographers and dancers working within traditions of the African diaspora: Alonzo King, Alvin Ailey, Garth Fagan, Donald Byrd, and Rennie Harris. Two articles featured krumping from Los Angeles, and b-boying from the Bronx, however to my surprise, the one article that exists on Jitting from Detroit titled “Fast-Stepped Fury, Rooted in Detroit,” written by Alistair Macaulay, published by the *New York Times* in 2014 was missing from the archive.¹²

The oldest article detailed the first national congress on blacks in dance, held in Bloomington, Indiana in 1973. Other articles wrote about: the Nicholas Brothers; the first African American woman to become a Rockette in 1989; the “House Jam” event in Detroit featuring Kevin Saunderson’s house group Inner City in 1989; and the vernacular dance “Da Butt,” from Spike Lee’s movie *School Daze*. A handful of other articles from the 1980s questioned the missing presence of African Americans in the US ballet world, such as Jack Slaters article, “Where are the Blacks in Ballet.”

Through the process of exploring this archive, I found it curious how many articles questioned the absence of the black dancer, mostly because they were written in the late 1970s to the mid-1980s. The missing presence of African American ballet dancers in the United States has just recently been acknowledged in the mainstream, with intense focus on Misty Copeland, who is the first African American woman to reach the level of principal dancer in American Ballet Theatre’s history, and Micaela Prince, who starred in the documentary *First Position*. Instead of feeling like I was scrutinizing relics and sifting through artifacts of the past, it felt completely current: Lincoln’s abolitionist stance, the missing black bodies in ballet, no mention of the dances of Motown—the past of the present was colliding.

¹¹ Ghattotech is a sub-genre of techno that became synonymous with Jit dancing in the 1990s, further discussed in Chapter Six.

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/11/arts/dance/detroit-jit-a-70s-street-dance-reborn-and-revved-up.html>

This process of finding “nothing” (because the Jit does not live in scholarly texts, published articles, Detroit’s cultural institutions, and archives) created a new source of knowledge, however it was not the knowledge I needed for this research. In order to understand this dance culture, I realized, I had to go straight to the source.

Rationale for the Research Design and Analytic Questions

Broadly, this research was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the Jit and how does one dance it?
2. How did the Jit first develop in Detroit and how have the movements evolved over time?
3. How did the relationship between the Jit and techno music develop?
4. How does the Jit relate to other local Detroit dance forms, such as house dance?
5. How do practitioners define the Jitting culture in Detroit?

For my dissertation research, ethnography was the most applicable method as I was interested in understanding the culture of the Jit, or in other words, the meaning-making surrounding who, why, and how people dance the Jit in Detroit. Moreover, answers to these questions could not be found in books, but only through immersing myself in the Jit culture.

Ethnography

With its origins stemming from the discipline of anthropology, ethnography is both a process and a product that details the nuances of human activity and culture, revealing “both the strengths and limitations of human perception and feelings” (Richardson, 2000, 254). Ethnography is a form of qualitative research that relies on

fieldwork to collect data in order to observe, analyze, and classify social phenomenon. Field techniques include note taking, analytic memoing, audio/visual recording, interviews, and participant observation. Once the data and information are organized and coded, it is the ethnographer's task to synthesize the material into a written monograph.

Mats Trondman and Paul Willis describe ethnography as a collection of methods predicated on long-term contact between the researcher and study participants, with ethnographer's "richly writing up" the details of this contact to represent a specific aspect of human experience (2000, 5). Clifford Geertz's term "thick description" is central to the practice of ethnography, which is concerned with describing in detail many attributes found within a culture or a cultural practice (Merriam 2009, 28). Rich, or "thick," description helps facilitate an "understanding of a culture for insiders and outsiders" by detailing "patterns of cultural experience," found in stories, events, and personal feelings (Ellis et al. 2010, 12).

For my fieldwork, as I was not only interested in understanding Jit culture but the particular mechanics of the dance form itself, the methodology of ethnography was central for the embodied nature of this research. Ethnographic methods, I believed, could help me unravel the connections between how and why people in Detroit dance the Jit by using "the five senses" to provide a "written photograph" of a specific cultural phenomenon (Kawulich 2005, 1). In other words, ethnography would allow me to bring my skills as a dancer, such as kinesthetic awareness and being a choreographer, to bear on learning the Jit and as well as understanding the culture.

The following two dance ethnographies shaped my research methods: *Dancing with the Virgin: Body and Faith in the Fiesta of Tortugas, New Mexico* (2001a), written by Deidre Sklar, and *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World-Making* (2002), written by Fiona Buckland. Both ethnographies use thick description, interviews, and participant observation.

Deidre Sklar's consideration of the role dance plays in society was influential on my research design for the ways she situates bodily movement as a form of cultural knowledge. In her study, she argues movement conjoins "felt bodily experience and the culturally based organization of that experience into cognitive patterns" (2001a, 4). In other words, for Sklar, "ways of moving are ways of thinking," which provide more insight to understanding particulars of a given culture (ibid). By using an ethnographic approach to studying dance forms, Sklar acquires a better understanding of the total dance event within its cultural context. Analyzing the way people move provides greater access to their cultural knowledge and insight into their motivations behind dancing.

Sklar presents the ethnographic work she conducted on the Tortugas Festival in New Mexico to explain how an ethnographic methodology comprised of thick dance description was highly effective for understanding the complexity of dance movement, in relation to the ritual of danced adoration for the Virgin of Guadalupe. She uses Clifford Geertz's example of the "eyewink" to emphasize that social codes are perceptible through embodied movements. Sklar argues that movement analysis is then necessary in understanding not only *why* a person winks but *how* they wink as well because "social meanings are embodied not just as symbols but also as kinetic dynamics" (2001a, 3).

Sklar relates Geertz's method of thick description to movement analysis, as they function in the same manner.

Fiona Buckland's ethnography consists of a four-year ethnographic study that examined how gay, lesbian, and queer dance club culture created alternative realities through the concept of "queer world-making," in the 1990s in New York City. I was particularly inspired by the way Buckland used interviews as an integral part of her data collection process to reveal the participants' perspectives on how they made meaning in their concrete and imagined club worlds. Her rigorous method served as a model for conducting ethical interviewing practices in my own fieldwork. For example, in the appendix of the text, Buckland provides a detailed list of methods she used in her study, including informant selection and recruitment, contact and consent, statement to informants, confidentiality, and target sites for observation. While all the information included in Buckland's appendix is relevant to my own research process, the section on the preparation of interview questions is particularly instructive. Buckland provides examples of the actual open-ended interview questions she utilized within her three-stage interview process. She even highlights the specific probing questions she asked her participants that brought her information to a point of saturation, in which the continuation of data collection only produced tiny increments of new knowledge.

Buckland stresses how important the interviews were for her research study: "It was outrageous even to think about writing this book without asking people what they thought they were doing in clubs. The meanings they made from these practices are more crucial than whatever meanings I impose with the theoretical tools in my standard issue

doctoral utility belt” (2002, 11). On the complications with interviewing in a club scene, Buckland details how the interviews could only take place outside of the club, because of loud noise and the fact that a queer club is a “safe” place. If Buckland had interviewed her participants inside the club, she would have positioned herself as an outsider (as an interviewer) and this would not have yielded optimal data. Moreover, in order to maintain the participant’s trust, Buckland implemented a rigorous methodology to ensure the safety of each participant during the interview process.

Participant Recruitment and Gaining Access to my Field Site

The first step taken to recruit dancers within the Jit culture was through the method of purposive sampling, where I attempted to cold contact a few dancers through social media and email. This method was not effective, as I only received a response from one person, who ultimately did not participate in my dissertation research. While attending a few Jit related events in Detroit, I also posted fliers seeking to recruit potential participants, which also yielded no interest. Eventually, my entry into the world of Jit was facilitated through a personal friend, Tristan Hackney, who is a working professional for General Motors, a spoken word poet, a stand-up comedian, and a Jitter. A year before I engaged in fieldwork, I contacted him with questions I had about specific movements of the Jit. I also mentioned that I wanted to interview him once my IRB application was complete. From then on, participant recruitment occurred through snowballing. Tristan introduced me to Haleem “Stringz” Rasul, a prominent figure in the Jit community, whose knowledge on all aspects of the Jit proved to be pivotal. In addition to interviewing Haleem, attending his Jit practice sessions became the home base of my

participant observation where most my fieldwork occurred, and provided a level of consistency for my research.

Data Collection

Observation and Participation

The first phase of my fieldwork began in the summer of 2017, which was dedicated to searching Detroit's brick-and-mortar public cultural and educational institutions, libraries, archives, museums, and foundations for information on the Jit. The second phase of fieldwork took place in concentrated segments from February 2018 through January 2019, largely at the Cass Corridor Neighborhood Development Corporation (CCNDC) at Haleem Rasul's practice sessions, where I attended Jit classes, studying with whomever was willing to teach that night. The free-of-charge sessions occurred almost every Monday and Wednesday, beginning at 7:30 pm and ending around 9:30 pm, but sometimes much later. During the course of my fieldwork, mostly African American men, ranging from teens to mature adults in their 60s attended, with some women and occasionally a few children. Most people that I spoke with explained they had heard about the practice cyphers from a friend. On almost any given night, people could be found Jitting as well as breaking, house dancing, krumping, voguing, whacking, pop/locking, Funkateering, old-school hip-hop dancing, and on one occasion I witnessed contemporary dance. Sometimes only three to four people were in attendance whereas other nights there were well over twenty dancers in attendance; no two nights were the same.

I also attended Jit classes at Michael Smith's Jit Masters (a dance collective of dancers who teach in the traditional dance studio setting) at the Motor City Dance Factory in Southfield, Michigan. I took Michael's classes as often as possible, usually once a week on Thursday evenings. The adult level classes were geared toward the intermediate level dancer, but true beginners took the class as well. Michael's class was one-hour in length but many nights he extended the time to continue working with me on the choreography he taught in class. Unlike Haleem's practice sessions being mostly attended by men, Michael's classes brought in more teen-aged female dancers.

Because I sprained my Achilles Tendon while taking a Jit class, approximately four months into my fieldwork, not being able to physically participate not only changed my researcher/observer outlook but also prompted me to develop a data collection approach I call "perspective is methodology." Before this accident occurred, I had been recording most of my observations of people dancing at Haleem's practice sessions on my iPhone, in addition to dancing myself. As a matter of practicality and wanting to archive the totality of the dancing bodies, I recorded all of the sessions through the frame of the full body. After injuring myself, only being able to observe and not participate at these various events prompted me to take ten metaphorical steps backwards. After analyzing numerous hours of participation footage, I realized that because I was also participating by dancing at these various events I was relying on my iPhone and HD camera to do the "observing" for me. As such, my viewpoint was passive because by default the camera was choosing what I would see.

Being injured forced me to actively observe, which I began to do by implementing different camera angles when I filmed dancers. For example, the low perspective homes in on only footwork; the mid-perspective focuses on only the torso, hips, arms, and hands; the high perspective catches the expressions of the face; and the downlow perspective captures the horizontal, panorama of the dance space with my eye being as close to the ground as possible by either sitting or lying on the floor. These spatially oriented viewpoints offered another way of “seeing” by deconstructing the movements of the body into smaller sections allowing me to thickly describe and analyze the fine details of the Jit.

As perspective became a methodology, so did editing my raw video footage into vignettes. After almost every one of Haleem’s practice sessions, I intuitively analyzed the video by extracting moments that were aesthetically beautiful and virtuosic, but also indicative of the culture itself, like Sklar’s theory of movement as knowledge, as evidenced how dancers positioned themselves in the space or the manner in which they entered or exited the practice cypher. Inspired by Kawulich’s idea of presenting knowledge through the five senses, I edited these various moments on the software program Final Cut Pro, into “moving monographs” that display the interconnected nature of the movements and the culture, detailing the sights, sounds, smells, and textures of the Jit. Edited through my choreographer’s eye and conceived through my doctoral dance scholar’s knowledge, the intention was to create videos/moments that at once felt produced and “arty” but still underground and raw.

“Powdered Footwork,” shot in black and white, provides an example of how I applied these various elements by visually presenting the sights, smells, sounds, texture, and even the taste of a Jit practice session through these various perspectives.¹³ The following is an excerpt from the field note written on this video.

It is a hot and humid summer night in Detroit at “Stringz Spot” and there is a decent turnout of dancers in attendance tonight. Because of the extreme humidity, the concrete dance floor is extremely sticky, which is painted to look like terracotta stone enmeshed in taupe-colored grout. Due to the muggy air, James sprinkles baby powder on the ground because everyone’s sneakers are sticking to the surface of the floor. Michael pivots his feet in various ways to work the baby powder into the grooves of his high-top kicks. It is a scene reminiscent of the ballet dance studio setting where dancers are swiveling their feet into boxes of resin in order not to slip on the floor. The booming sounds are soulful house with feminine notes from the vocalist, to hard-hitting Detroit techno/electro tracks, mostly devoid of lyrics. As the dancers begin to move their feet, clouds of baby powder are emanating from the Jitting feet. As time passed, large amounts of baby powder were visibly suspended in the air. The labor of these dancing bodies is evidenced by the worn-off missing paint in the middle of the dance space, by the sweat marks on their t-shirts, and the glossy-sheen on their brows. The room smells of a sweaty, dusty baby and I can even taste a chalkiness in the air.

From the mid: an exhibition cypher forms and various dancers perform solos. While Michael, Sonic, Noah, and Gabby perform some of the other dancers are watching intently by analyzing their technique. Some give nods of the head during Noah’s solo as they are feeling his musicality and how he is riding the lightning fast beats during his bisco and transition to the floor.¹⁴ James performs kinesthetic empathy or perhaps it is musical visualization with his hands while fixedly watching another dancer in the cypher. Larry and Haleem are on the side performing the only choreographed duet of the night, which is a slow groove Jit. James

¹³ <https://www.melanastaciadance.com/embodied-research?wix-vod-video-id=ac62a8f2679c484e8c3c1793ff3cdc1d&wix-vod-comp-id=comp-jhxp45q5#>

¹⁴ The bisco is an element of the contemporary style of Jit, belonging to the category of armwork, where the feet and arms move in tandem. The bisco will be further discussed in chapter six.

removes himself from the action and sits next to the Christmas tree in the front left corner of the space and checks his smartphone.

From the downlow: The extreme close up on Gabby's footwork positions her legs as a proscenium arch of sorts, as we are viewing all of the men dancing behind her, through the framework of her legs. As she is the only woman at the practice session (besides the female behind the camera) this speaks to the male-centric nature of the Jit. Michael's powdered footwork is literally kicking up smoke; Haleem sits on the floor performing a virtuosic hybrid of footwork and floorwork; and in the culminating scene, James travels towards the camera with an onslaught of shuffles and other iterations of footwork performed in work-type boots with untied shoelaces and the bottoms of his black and white Adidas track pants gathered at the top of his boots.

In the end, edited vignettes paired with corresponding field notes functioned as a complementary system where my participation was not only active but also intuitive. This system of movement analysis examined raw footage and distilled it down to specific themes or ideas. Then by editing that footage in order to make these themes more apparent, the perspective of the camera and process of editing the footage served as an extension of thick-description and movement analysis.

In addition to my regular participant observation at Stringz Spot and Jit Masters, I also attended dance performances, such as the Dance Night at the Detroit Institute of Arts where Haleem's dance crew Hardcore Detroit, performed a Jit piece and the Detroit Electronic Music Festival where Jit Masters performed a live-set onstage with recording artist Milan Ariel, who is Juan Atkins' (known as the godfather of Detroit techno) daughter. I recorded most of these events on digital media and documented my observations and analytic memos in my field journals.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations that arose during the data collection process were due to my participant recruitment process of snowballing, which had positive and negative effects. Snowballing brought me to various participants who were part of the current culture, which generally consisted of younger Jitters who were eager to participate in my research. As a result, there are generational “holes” in my participant demographic and research. I would have liked for more seasoned Jitters to have more of a presence in my data, such as Jitters from the Mad Dancers and Dream Team. Due to the time constraints of my fieldwork, I was not able to interview as many dancers from the 1980s and 1990s as I had originally planned on, because I was not introduced to most of them until my last week of fieldwork at a Jit event in Detroit.

Interviews

In addition to participant observation, I conducted interviews with sixteen participants (three women and thirteen men) to collect information about their unique experiences and ideas on the Jit. Once a potential participant expressed interest, I arranged an initial phone call during which time I answered any questions the participant had, reviewed procedures and potential risks, and scheduled the interview. Times and sites for the interviews were arranged at the convenience of the participants; accordingly, many of the interviews occurred at a coffeehouse around the corner from the CCNDC before Haleem’s practice sessions. Other interviews took place in public parks in Detroit, restaurants, such as Denny’s, bars located in downtown Detroit, apartments, a dance studio, the Detroit Institute of Arts, and virtually on FaceTime. I provided a consent form

via email prior to our first interview so the participant could read the terms and ask any questions before the actual interview took place. I then brought a printed copy that each participant signed at the first interview. The consent form, as approved by the TWU Institutional Review Board, explained the purpose of the study, the possible risks to the participant, and listed the measures the researcher will take to protect their rights. Each interview was scheduled to last no longer than one-and-a-half-hours, however, most lasted two hours. I did not conduct follow-up interviews with all of the participants as most of the interviews went over the initial time limit.

I chose to create open-ended interview questions that offered the possibility of drawing out the interviewee's opinions and gathering specific details. Questions included: How would you describe the Jitting community in Detroit?; What marks the Jit as distinctly "Detroit"?; What is the Jit?; and, How would you very intricately describe the Jit, visually, to a person who lacks sight? Utilizing the interrogative words of *how* and *what* offer the interviewee an open-ended platform to speak freely about her or his experience of the Jit in Detroit. Cumulatively, the responses were rich in description and each participant contributed to this research study in unique ways. Some had more historical knowledge where others spoke more about the culture and the dance form, itself. Ultimately, the interview questions prompted open-ended conversations that encouraged my participants to reflect on their personal history and involvement with the Jit in Detroit. While interviewing, I tried to the best of my abilities to not lead my participants in any way. However, because I grew up in the Detroit area and at one time was enmeshed in the techno and house scene in Detroit, I have knowledge that directly

relates to this dissertation. Sometimes the interview would veer into conversation territory, where I inserted my own thoughts and theories on specific ideas. I tried to be cognizant of this and when I noticed it happening, I referred back to my script of interview questions.

Participant Pool

My participant pool consisted of Jitters, dancers with connections to the Jit community, and one DJ/music producer, equaling seventeen participants:

Eric Broadnax: Southwest Detroit-native, specializing in Jit, Eric was exposed to the Jit through dancer Tristan Hackney, who became his mentor. Eric has participated in Jit events with Haleem “Stringz” Rasul’s Hardcore Detroit dance crew and Eric was one of the featured dancers in Alastair Macaulay’s article “Fast-Stepped Fury, Rooted in Detroit” (2014), published in the *New York Times*. In 2016 Eric was also a featured Jitter in the music video “Back Up” by Detroit-based singer and rapper Dej Loaf, featuring Big Sean, which received national attention, fostering a resurgence of the popularity of the Jit in Detroit.

James Broxton Jr.: Detroit-based dancer, actor, and runway and print model, specializing in the Jit. James danced in the Detroit-produced musical “Black Bottom Paradise” and was a member of the Detroit Pistons D-Town dance team, sharing the performance floor with Flo’Rida, Bell Biv DeVoe, Bobby Brown, MC Hammer, Sheila E., Jay Sean, Morris Day, T-Pain, Salt N’ Pepa, 112, and Robyn S. Currently, James is part of the Jit dance crew The League in Detroit.

Eryk “DJ Arch-E-Tect” Christian: Detroit-native, DJ, and music producer, Eryk holds a Bachelor of Science in Architecture and a Master of Science in Intelligence Analysis from the University of Detroit Mercy. Eryk has been DJ’ing professionally for two decades and has developed a thorough understanding of the art of DJ’ing and the various genres of music that have influenced the landscape of hip hop music since its creation in the mid-1970s. Eryk’s knowledge of music starts with techno, which was founded in the city of Detroit. His original music tracks were featured in Haleem Rasul’s documentary *The Jitterbugs: Pioneers of the Jit*. Eryk is one of the founding members of the Urban Arts Collective in Detroit, whose mission is to “effectively engage, equip, and encourage underrepresented communities to explore S.T.E.A.M careers” (Urban Arts Collective) through innovative programming, such as hip hop architecture camps.

Ronald Ford Jr.: Detroit-based dancer, choreographer, performer, music producer, and playwright. In 2006, Ronald created The Unstoppables, which is the last formalized collective of Funkateers who are still actively performing in Detroit today. Along with the Unstoppables, he has performed for world-renowned artists, such as Afrika Bambaataa, Run DMC, Los Hermanos, and AUX 88. Ronald has performed at the Palace of Auburn Hills, Chene Park, and on the main stage at the Detroit Electronic Music Festival and internationally in Germany and Korea. Ronald is passionate about not only disseminating knowledge of the Funkateer dance style but pursuing creative projects to preserve this important legacy of Detroit’s dance culture as he is currently working on producing a documentary titled: *The Funkateers: The Dance, Group & Legacy*. In 2018, he was awarded the Kresge Artist Fellowship for his work in dance. Under his solo artist

name QWNTYM (Quantum), Ronald is exploring the possibilities of the Funkateer by tweaking a twenty-year-plus idea of creating a new dance form with a Funkateer foundation he calls QWNTYM FNK (Quantum Funk). He is the owner of Peerless Apex LLC, which is an entertainment business associated with Detroit dance music and live performances.

Tristan “Tick It Master” Hackney: Detroit-based dancer, actor, stand-up comedian, and MC/host who holds a Master of Science in Information Security and a Bachelor of Sciences in African American Studies with a minor in Film and Radio Broadcasting from Eastern Michigan University. While studying at Eastern Michigan University, Tristan was cast as an extra in Eminem’s hit movie *8 Mile* and was nominated twice for the NAACP Alvin Ailey Award at Eastern Michigan University. As a writer and an actor, Tristan travels throughout the United States performing his pieces, which are influenced by his social, political, and educational background. With his performances, he hopes his words empower communities to be the changes they need. In addition to performing poetry, Tristan recently joined the prominent Jit Masters Dance Crew in Detroit and was a finalist in the acclaimed Motown Mic talent show. He also is a host of the newly launched web talk show *The Grit*, a weekly YouTube show focusing on building and empowering urban communities in Detroit and beyond.

Willie “Sonic” Hull: Detroit-based dancer, specializing in the Jit and his own technique called “foot twisting.” Willie was a member of The League crew and is part of Michael Smith’s Jit Masters, teaching Jit master classes and private lessons.

Lilanie (Lily) Karunanayake: Detroit-based dancer trained in ballet, tap, jazz, lyrical, hip hop, and most recently Jit, under the tutelage of Mike Manson. Lily received her Bachelor of Arts in criminal justice at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. After graduation, she joined different Detroit hip hop crews and was exposed to the Detroit Jit. Lily has traveled to Phoenix, Arizona, Washington DC, and Chicago, Illinois with different dance crews, representing and disseminating the Jit culture. She is currently a member of The League dance crew.

Mike Manson: Inkster native, teaching artist, and choreographer, specializing in the street dance forms of popping and Detroit Jit. In 2015, Mike was a featured dancer on the television program *So You Think You Can Dance*, which showcased his expertise of Detroit Jit in his audition footage. For three seasons, Mike was a member and primary choreographer of the Detroit Pistons dance crew D-Town, where he formed the association's first Jit/hip hop crew that performed at the halftime shows. He was also a hip hop squad member for the Women's National Basketball Association team Phoenix Mercury and is currently a member of the dance crew Hardcore Detroit. Mike's teaching credits include Jit and hip-hop master classes at Arizona State University's Department of Dance, the Columbia College Chicago Dance Center, Broadway Dance Center, New York City, and internationally in Paris, France and in La Paz, Bolivia. Mike also has taught dance at multiple juvenile detention centers in Detroit to offer creative and productive ways for youths to be engaged, conscientious citizens.

Johnny McGhee and Tracey McGhee: Detroit-natives and two of the founding members of the dance group the Jitterbugs. Johnny and Tracey McGhee are credited with

forging the original/traditional style of the Jit in the 1970s in Detroit. Under the mentorship of Motown singing artist Kim Weston, Johnny and Tracey performed at Idlewild, Michigan, in various events and venues in Detroit, and throughout the United States, notably with the North American Auto Show Tour. Both brothers were featured in Haleem Rasul's feature-length documentary *Jitterbugs: Pioneers of the Jit* and received critical acclaim for their television appearance on *So You Think You Can Dance*.

John Nance: Detroit-based dancer and member of the X-Menn dance crew, who specializes in Jit. John is credited as one of the few artists who traveled overseas with the Jit. With other members of the X-Menn crew, John traveled to Amsterdam, Holland with the Godfather of techno, Juan Atkins, Jitting on stage as a part of Atkins' world tour. John was also featured in Alastair Macaulay's article "Fast-Stepped Fury, Rooted in Detroit" (2014), published in the *New York Times*. John was also instrumental for the Better Detroit Youth Movement, mentoring children through dance.

Haleem "Stringz" Rasul: Detroit-based dance performing artist, choreographer, and artist educator, proficient in breakin', house dance, and Jit. Haleem graduated from Western Michigan University in 2001 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in graphic design and in the same year, he formed the dance company and fashion label Hardcore Detroit. In 2010, Hardcore Detroit was voted best dance crew in the Real Detroit Reader's Poll. Haleem was awarded the Kresge Artist Fellowship in 2010 and won the Knights Arts Challenge in 2013 and was bestowed with the title of "Dance Ambassador of Detroit." He is the director of the documentary *The Jitterbugs: Pioneers of the Jit*, which was the first film to present the origins of the dance form. Hardcore Detroit was contracted by the

Detroit Pistons to provide urban dance entertainment for the 2012 basketball season, showcasing the Jit within the entertainment lineup. Haleem was also the main choreographer for the Pistons' D-Town B-Boys. Haleem worked with the Detroit Pistons halftime entertainment group, where he performed with MC Hammer, Doug E. Fresh, Vanilla Ice, Salt N' Pepa, Naughty By Nature, Fat Joe, Black Sheep, Busta Rhymes and numerous others. Haleem has taught dance workshops and presented choreography at Columbia College Chicago, Eastern Michigan University, Wayne State University, the University of Michigan, California State University, and he has given international workshops in China.

In 2015, the Zimbabwe Cultural Center in Detroit (ZCCD), in collaboration with the Jibilika Dance Trust, sponsored a dance residency in Harare, Zimbabwe, where Haleem conducted research and interviews and led workshops in Mutare and other various towns. He collaborated with a selected group that performed for the opening dance act of the festival with Jit set as the leading form of the entire piece. In 2016, Haleem attended the Next Level Hip Hop Diplomacy in Indonesia that promoted cultural exchange and mutual understanding as well as a dance residency in Kurdistan through Yes Academy and American Voices. As a dance ambassador for the city of Detroit, Haleem's mission is to continue expanding creative heights for Detroit's own unique movements. He seeks to inspire curators to lead future projects centered on cultural engagement/reciprocity, education, performance, tournaments, documentation, archiving, and various beneficial opportunities that will continue to uphold the legacy of the dances born in Detroit as true artforms.

Gabby Smith: Detroit-based dancer, choreographer, teaching artist, entrepreneur, and founder of G Marie Media. Gabby holds a Bachelor of Science in Dance from Wayne State University and is currently on the teaching faculty at the Detroit-Windsor Dance Academy.

Michael Smith: Native Detroiter and founder of Jit Masters. As a teenager growing up on the Eastside of Detroit, Michael believes that dancing, specifically the Jit, saved his life. The Jit kept Michael and his friends off the streets and out of trouble. Michael majored in dance at the Detroit High School for the Fine and Performing Arts and studied business at Wayne State University and choreographed a video for Michael Bivens' group Biv 10. Michael created the dance collective Jit Masters, with the impetus to make the Detroit Jit known worldwide. Jit Masters consists of an experienced dance crew that offers weekly dance lessons at the Motor City Dance Factory in Southfield, Michigan. Jit Masters also offer private dance lessons, and master classes. Michael believes that because the Jit has been around for a while that it is time for the world to experience this piece of Detroit culture.

Reggie “Munch” Turner: Detroit-based dancer specializing in the forms of Jit and Funkateering. Reggie self-describes himself as a “dancing chameleon” due to his love and respect for multiple genres of dance. Growing up in Detroit, he watched *The Scene* and *Dance Fever* and his major dance influences are: the Nicholas Brothers, James Brown, Bruno “Pop N Taco” Falcon, and Fred Astaire. Reggie credits the Funkateers and the Police dance group as his inspiration for learning technical footwork. Reggie was an affiliate of the renowned Jit group the Mad Dancers. Being close friends with “Bisco” Joe

Hill, who was a later member of the Mad Dancers, together they would showcase their footwork in between class in high school in 1988. Being an “OG” (original gangster) in the game, Reggie has embodied knowledge on how the Jit was performed, from the late 1980s to now, and can describe and display many variations.

Kenya “Standing Ovation” Sutton: Detroit-based dancer, choreographer, DJ, and teaching artist specializing in her unique style called “beat manipulation,” who is currently working towards a Bachelor of Arts in Communications from Eastern Michigan. Kenya, who is also known as “the Queen of Detroit” in Detroit’s street dance culture, was a featured dancer on the television program *So You Think You Can Dance* and currently teaches master classes for Michael Smith’s Jit Masters in Detroit.

Analytic Memoing

The last data collection method I used was analytic memoing, which was a valuable tool for revealing my own biases and assumptions that I held during the data collection and coding processes. Analytic memoing offered a way to for me to reflect on my data, during the process of collecting data and helped track my own assumptions about the Jit. For example, memoing allowed me to “reflect on and write about emergent patterns, categories, themes, concepts and assertions,” as well as “reflect on and write about any personal or ethical dilemmas with the study” (Saldaña 2015, 48). Merriam advocates for the process of writing memos to oneself, “as they mark issues raised in the setting and how they relate to larger theoretical, methodological, and substantive issues” (2009, 172). Through memoing, I was able to discern what I was learning from the data and thus use that information to challenge any pre-existing notions I may have brought

into the research.

I used memoing to analyze various types of collected data, such as field notes, interview transcripts, archival materials, and audio/visual materials, and all of the previously mentioned edited videos/vignettes I produced. I recorded memos with various media including the voice recorder option and Notes application on my iPhone and iPad, as well as handwriting notes into my journal. The software program Evernote was a valuable source for transcribing and organizing these memos. In Evernote, I created a folder just for analytic memos, which was different from my field notes folder because for my process analytic memos usually consisted of short, fast bursts of ideas or things that would occur instantly. Conversely, my field notes were lengthy, thick-descriptions of usually one event, thing, or larger idea that took time to think through and synthesize into a written document. As an example, before engaging in fieldwork, I had an assumption that Jitters only danced to techno or ghettotech music. However, during the early stages of my fieldwork, through interviewing and observing different practice sessions and classes, I learned this was not true. Jitters also danced to house music, funk, and sometimes faster hip hop tracks or with no music at all. Thus, during every interview, practice session, or Jit related event I would attend, I created a special collection of field notes devoted just to documenting the different genres of music that were co-mingling with the Jit, as a means to keep my mistaken supposition in check. From these field notes, I wrote analytic memos, distilling the data into smaller ideas and questioning the larger implications of Jitters dancing to house music and hip hop, which lead to new threads of knowledge. Broadly, taking field notes allowed me to document “messy” ideas or

thoughts with no judgement that I eventually “polished” through the processes of analytic memoing.

Data Analysis

Moving from the process of data collection to data analysis, I used coding as another means to challenge my own assumptions about the data. Coding is an important tool for qualitative research as it offers a method for organizing, collating, and classifying raw data sets. Coding is a shorthand system that organizes, analyzes, and synthesizes what is occurring in the data. The interpretative act of coding has the potential to move from raw data into categories, as coding reveals themes, motifs, and patterns occurring across the data set. A code is “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña 2015, 4). Codes can be applied to topics, ideas, concepts, images, phrases, and keywords. A category is a word or phrase describing some segment of the data that is explicit.

According to Johnny Saldaña, the process of moving from codes and categories to theory occurs when “you compare major categories with each other and consolidate them in various ways,” which then allows you to “transcend the particular reality of your data and progress towards the thematic, conceptual, and theoretical” (Saldaña 2015, 14). Saldaña contends that coding functions as “a heuristic for achieving some sense of clarity about the world from your data and your deep reflections on them” (2015, 42), which is neither a philosophy nor precise science, but a practice shaped by interpretation.

Coding was a valuable tool for distinguishing recurring patterns within the data, that I was not fully in tune with during the interview process. Coding also challenged my assumptions and biases, because diverse points of view emerged from my data, rather than emanating from my perspective as the researcher. As an example, during the process of conducting interviews, I had the impression that there was a general sense of accord among the members of the Jit community. However, when I began coding the interviews this assumption was challenged by the amount of data that detailed the various debates and differences in opinion within the culture. Thus, without this coded data, my research would have not reflected a complex and important aspect of the Jit culture. Coding also allowed me to see differences occurring in the data, characterized by similarity, difference, frequency, and causation. For example, through the coding method of lumping, I discovered that the significance of other street dance forms like hip hop and Chicago footworking to Jit culture was greater than I had expected, based on my interviews.

I used lumper coding to “capture and represent the essence” of an entire excerpt or passage, and splitter coding to “split the data into smaller codeable moments” (Saldaña 2015, 24). Saldaña describes the differences between the two coding methods: “[L]umping gets to the essence of categorizing a phenomenon, while splitting encourages careful scrutiny of social action represented in the data” (ibid). After manually coding my interviews with the lumper technique, the one-word codes that were most prevalent in the data set were: Chicago, community, culture, die/dead/dying/foot/footwork/footworking/feet, street, underground, and hip hop, to name a few. Then,

applying the splitting technique to these codes, which was much more time consuming and detail-oriented than lumping, I was able to deconstruct or split these codes into more detailed categories. As an example, I split the code community into smaller, more specific themes that detailed how the participants were using the word community differently or interchangeably with the term culture; how participants described community; and issues pertaining to sub-communities, such as the Westside Jit community versus the Eastside. And from these categories, breaking them into even smaller divisions offered more specific particulars. As both techniques offered different findings, the process of analyzing the data benefited from vacillating between both methods. I also used this system for the second round of data coding, which revealed a few smaller specific details I did not catch during the first round, such as the “Detroit mentality” that many participants feel holds the Jit back from disseminating into other street dance cultures. However, the second round of coding generally revealed a saturation of data where I was not gleaning anything new.

After completing the process of manually coding my entire data set, I used the software program NVIVO to detect what fine details I might have missed. In contrast to manual coding, I found NVIVO to be not user-friendly and its system for organizing codes into themes and nodes to be less intuitive than the manual process I utilized. What was most useful was NVIVO’s word count feature that offered a quantitative analysis of the words that most frequently appeared in my data set, which generally reflected the codes I had created through first and second round data analysis. Overall, coding was a

valuable system for allowing the voices of the participants to shape the data by putting my own biases and assumptions aside.

Positionality and Ethical Considerations

Since the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, there are ethical implications in ethnographic work, such as the researcher's responsibility for protecting the safety of her or his participants, as well as being cognizant of one's own positionality within the research study. Zoila S. Mendoza's text *Shaping Society through Dance: Mestizo Ritual Performance in the Peruvian Andes* (2000) addresses these issues and her methods shaped my ethical viewpoint before I began my course of fieldwork in Detroit.

Mendoza's ethnography was sourced from fieldwork and research she conducted while living in Cusco, Peru from 1989 to 1990. Mendoza employed an interdisciplinary methodology that utilized ethnographic fieldwork, ethnomusicology, and choreographic analysis to shape her lens of inquiry into the world of the dance *comparsas* (dance fraternities) of the highlands of Cusco. Mendoza's treatment of her positionality within the context of her study was relevant to my research as her position of "insider/outsider" marked her investigation in various ways. A native Peruvian from Lima, Mendoza nonetheless studied a dance culture from a social and economic class other than her own. What is significant to note is the importance Mendoza placed on finding a balance between these outsider and insider standpoints to allow the voices of the participants to lead the research. Mendoza insisted on having the perceptions of her participants direct her understanding of how these specific dances not only reflected societal attitudes, but

also functioned as catalysts that continually transformed the *comparsa* culture. Most important for my research, Mendoza's research emphasizes that taking on the responsibility of representing the lives and cultures of others has consequences.

My positionality assumes a unique liminal perspective in that I do not wholly qualify as an insider, but also, I am not just an outsider. On the outside, as a white female, I am examining an art form created by African American men. Growing up outside of Detroit in an upper middle-class, predominately white suburb in close proximity to Detroit, I had geographic proximity to Detroit but I didn't grow up within the city limits of Detroit. This gave me access to Detroit's racially diverse techno/house music scene. In other words, I was able to enter Detroit to attend raves, parties, and afterhours, but then exited when the events ended. Before conducting fieldwork, my dance experience in contemporary and ballet made me an outsider to the Jit, however dancing in the field and learning from Jitters brought me to the inside. A number of Jitters told me that being a dancer became a conduit for me being welcomed and accepted inside the Jit culture.

Being cognizant of my insider/outsider positionality before I engaged in fieldwork, I knew my obligation as the researcher was to strive for transparency by acknowledging and monitoring how biases (including my own ideas, experiences, and expectations) could potentially inform the collection process and interpretation of data (Merriam 2009, 14). I was aware that issues of race and gender could have been a hurdle for this research study. Even though I did not have all the answers on how to navigate this situation before going into fieldwork, I was aware that being totally transparent with my rationale and schema for this dissertation was the best plan of action.

D. Soyini Madison offers clear parameters on the ethical responsibilities of the ethnographer, Madison states, “I contend that critical ethnography is always a meeting of multiple sides in an encounter with and among others, one in which there is negotiation and dialogue toward substantial and viable meanings that make a difference in others’ worlds” (2012, 10). That is, an ethical ethnography combines the shared experiences and embodied knowledges of both the observer and observed.

Influenced by Madison’s ideas on critical ethnography, my intention for this dissertation was for the finished product to serve the Jit community as a source of self-representation that helps disseminate knowledge on the dance form. I utilized member checks, such as asking my participants to read their transcribed interviews, with the option to edit, add, or remove content, or completely withdrawal from the study. Only a few of the participants read the transcripts and sent back feedback using track changes in Microsoft Word. I also emailed participants drafts of chapters where they were quoted directly, which with some participants resulted in a collaborative process of editing and refining historical dates, terminologies, and small details. I also requested that each participant submit their dance biography in order to highlight their accomplishments, dance experience, and philosophies in this methodology chapter, through the means they wanted to be represented. Lastly, I reinforced that this dissertation is a collaborative endeavor and they had influence over their words, ideas, and theories.

As effective as these collaborative measures were for relaying my desire for the dissertation to ultimately serve the Jit community, I believe it would have been more difficult to *get* to these processes without my participation in learning how to Jit. As

expressed to me by some of my participants, the Jit community is generally skeptical of outsiders (and their agendas), because they have been exploited by certain individuals and situations in the past. Near the end of my fieldwork, one participant explained that if during the practice sessions I would have been only sitting in the corner on a chair, taking notes on the particulars of the environment, week-after-week, he would not have participated in my study. However, because I was heavily invested in learning how to Jit and because I was a dancer, he explained that he saw my intentionality through dance. Coming into the community as a dancer, even though my fluency is in other genres, this seemed to help mitigate fears that I was a “culture vulture” lurking in the corners with my doctoral paraphernalia, ready to (mis)appropriate Jit culture. I also believe that my willingness to “fail” (looking less like a trained dancer and more like a floundering novice) while learning the foundation and form communicated my deep respect and admiration I held for not only the necessity to learn the dance form, but the for the individual movements themselves. In other words, even though I entered fieldwork as an outsider, having the similar experience and deep understanding of communicating through the body gave me a different kind of respect that was not just granted, but earned through my dedication and seriousness of studying the craft of Jit.

CHAPTER IV

DOCUMENTING THE ORIGINS OF THE JIT: HALEEM “STRINGZ” RASUL AND THE JITTERBUGS

In the first place you got James McGhee, but everybody calls him Freaky Mane
In the second place, you got John Don Juan and that boy got a many-a-fan
And in the third place, that’s Tracey McGhee and he sure looks good to me
And here to cut the rug are the Jitterbugs and dancing is their thang, gang bang!

—The Boone Bros. “(Party People) Throwdown” (1983)

During my doctoral coursework at Texas Woman’s University, I learned about the premiere of the documentary: *The Jitterbugs: Pioneers of the Jit* (2014), available on Amazon.com, produced and directed by Detroit-native Haleem “Stringz” Rasul, on a Facebook post. Even though I did not know Haleem personally, we had already been “friends” on Facebook for a couple of years. As previously mentioned, though my search for scholarly work on the Jit was futile, fortunately the Jit community had a visible online presence via various community pages on Facebook and through personal Instagram pages. Through social media, I became familiar with Haleem’s work as a dancer, artist, and advocate for disseminating knowledge on the Jit culture in Detroit and beyond. After viewing the documentary in my dorm room on my computer, my dissertation research now had a starting place: the Jitterbugs, who I now knew to be the pioneers of the Jit. Moreover, I had my first research informant: Haleem was the person inside the Jit culture who I needed to connect with to get to know the Jit up close.

This chapter draws from Haleem's documentary as well as interviews I conducted with Haleem Rasul, and Johnny and Tracey McGhee of the Jitterbugs in order to construct a history of the origins of the Jit. I also utilize the McGhee brothers' television appearance on *So You Think You Can Dance* in 2013 and a master's thesis written on the Jitterbugs (Reed 2014), presenting direct quotes from Johnny and Tracey McGhee. As discussed in the Introduction, the history here is not always neatly compartmentalized or chronological, as there are overlaps between people, time, space, place, ideas, and events. This structure reflects how much of this information was presented to me during interviews and through casual conversations I had with Haleem, Johnny, Tracey, and other members of the Jit community. In other words, personal stories and individual viewpoints were presented in fragments, as asynchronous narratives, operating outside of normative conceptions of time.¹⁵ This chapter does not seek to construct a complete history but instead charts moments and movements over time, illuminating the movement vocabulary of the traditional Jit; the musical culture surrounding the emergence of the Jit in the early 1970s; the people and groups that were highly influential on the dance form during its early years; and most importantly, the personal trials, tribulations, and successes of McGhee brothers, bringing them and the Jit from, as Johnny says, almost something to almost nothing.

¹⁵ Synchrony is concerned with the relationally between specific events, often within a short time-span, whereas asynchrony indicates events not occurring at the same time or being out of sync with time.

The Jit was created in the early 1970s in Detroit, by the dance collective called The Jitterbugs, originally created by James McGhee and Stanley “Big Stan” Boweman and the other members, Tracey McGhee, Johnny McGhee, and Tony Carasage were later added to the group. The Jitterbugs’ distinct movement vocabulary and choreographies fostered the birth of Detroit’s indigenous dance form—the Jit. However, until 2014 this information was not common knowledge in the city of Detroit and also among the Jit community at large. Until the release of the documentary *The Jitterbugs: Pioneers of the Jit*, the origins of who Jitted first were largely unknown and there was a vast gap of knowledge in regards to Jit’s genealogy. Auspiciously, this lost story of North American dance heritage was discovered by Haleem, who is an avid Jitter, breaker, house dancer, artist educator, dance ambassador, choreographer, and advocate for promoting and continuing Jit culture in Detroit.

The “Mayor of Jit:” Haleem “Stringz” Rasul

Before delving into the genesis of the Jitterbugs, it is important to present Haleem’s path, which prompted him to research the largely unknown origins of the Jit in Detroit. During my fieldwork in Detroit, Haleem was the second person I had the pleasure of interviewing. His knowledge on all aspects of the mechanics of Jit and the culture itself were invaluable for this project. In preparation for my interview with Haleem, I watched his documentary twice and based more than half of my interview script on questions that emerged from the story he presented on the origins of the Jit.

On a bitter cold, not yet spring, mid-March-in-Michigan evening, I had my first interview with Haleem at the Cass Corridor Neighborhood Development Corporation

(CCNDC) in Detroit. Since 2005, Haleem has held dance practice sessions at the CCNDC on most Monday and Wednesday evenings, open to dancers trained in any genre or non-trained dancers wanting to learn from whoever is teaching on any given night. However, most of the people who frequent the practice sessions are experienced in street styles, such as Jit, house, breaking, and krump.

I scheduled to meet Haleem at 5:30 pm, exactly two hours before the practice session started, giving us plenty of time to talk before the music started blasting at 7:30 pm. As I parked my car in the parking lot behind the CCNDC, Haleem had already arrived and was pulling a large kicker speaker from the backseat of his black Chevrolet truck. While I was gathering my bags full of interview paraphernalia of printed interview questions, consent forms, blank sheets of paper, pens, pencils, erasers, iPhone, iPad, and my purple accordion dissertation folder, Haleem lugged the heavy speaker through the back-door entrance.

Entering the space, the internal temperature was not much warmer than the temperature outside. I greeted Haleem and we quickly decided on the optimal location within the large room to conduct the interview. Setting up my technology to record the interview on my iPad and iPhone, Haleem explained that he would not be able to turn the heat on during the interview because the noise emanating from the giant furnace was so loud, it would interfere with the audio quality. Hence, we stayed bundled up for the interview. I wore my winter jacket with my thick black infinity scarf looped around my neck and Haleem draped the hood from his sweatshirt over his Hardcore Detroit baseball hat.

Explaining that the interview process would begin on the macro-level and then dig into the particulars of the Jit at the micro-level, I asked Haleem various questions ranging from his take on the current Jit community in Detroit to how he describes his style of Jit. In his deep, but soft-spoken voice he explains, “a lot of people tell me that my style is smooth. Coming from a b-boy background I would have to say that I can bring some of that flavor to it [Jit] and created something unique, in a different direction, based on my experiences with other dance forms.” As the interview progresses, I realize that Haleem’s passion for advancing the Jit culture, breakdancing, and his city of Detroit had roots reaching far back into his childhood.

Haleem attended Mumford High School on Detroit’s Westside, where he first witnessed the Jit danced in the school’s hallways. Haleem explains that his “oldest memory of just the Jit period is me actually trying to do it. Another memory is one of the songs that really drew me into it. It was the song called ‘I’m Freaky’ and every time it came on it just made me want to do that dance.” Haleem graduated from Mumford in 1995 and details, “during that time I didn’t know Jitting was exclusive to Detroit. A lot of other people thought the same thing, I have found. I didn’t know the music was also specific [to Detroit].” Haleem, like many other Jitters within the culture, was introduced to the Jit and locally produced techno/Jit music tracks on the television show *The New Dance Show*, which aired on the local Detroit channel 62 WGPR, which was the first completely black-owned and operated television channel in the United States (*The New Dance Show*). Haleem explains that he watched *The New Dance Show* every day, which aired four days a week between 1988 and 1995.

In the following statement, Haleem explains the importance of his oscillation between dancing the Jit and breakdancing while growing up in Detroit:

My gateway to hip hop, I was really young, was through my late cousin who used to dance on *The Scene*, the precursor to the *New Dance Show*, and I was drawn into breakin' at that moment. He passed away. Then in school I started being drawn to Jit. My older brother was a rapper and was getting into the hip hop clubs but I was too young. He told me there were some b-boys there and that totally inspired me to get back into breakin'. Just him mentioning, because nobody was breakin'. And I just remember when my cousin used to do it and I used to enjoy it and I was like "oh, I'm gonna try to bring this back." So, I went breakin' full time for a long stretch. When I started traveling and got to a certain level it made me reflect on my city and what we bring different. I saw Miami brings something different in b-boying, West coast brings something different in b-boying, ya know East Coast. And I was like, "dang, what does Detroit have different?"—it was Jit and I wanted to start to revisit that.

Haleem graduated from Western Michigan University in 2001 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in graphic design and in the same year he formed the dance company and fashion label Hardcore Detroit. On the title of his dance company, he says, "Hardcore represents success after struggle and overcoming hardships to achieve victory."

Haleem started to become an in-demand teacher of street dance forms, notably in institutions of higher learning, teaching master classes at: the University of Michigan, Oakland Community College, California State University, Columbia College in Chicago, Wayne State University in Detroit, and Eastern Michigan University in Ypsilanti.

On his experience as a guest resident choreographer for Eastern Michigan University's dance department, I ask Haleem if he taught the dance majors the Jit. He responds, "Yep, strictly the Jit." I reply, "So, you have had to figure out how to work with ballet and contemporary trained dancers," and he quickly responds, "Yeah, and make a long-ass piece. You know with Jitters, nobody has really explored it in that way.

Of making a three to five-minute piece.” I respond, “A concert piece.” He says, “Yeah, the time that you get with them is really not enough in my opinion.” Haleem continues, “Like, just imagine if we could do that with dancers who have put in a lot of years, who understand movement, and have their bodies conditioned a certain way. And then put on a piece. Because, this [the Jit] is foreign to a lot of my students. So, the feel of it, the form is not necessarily there. But it’s still a piece and it’s well received.” Through his laughter, Haleem states, “But just imagine if those were actual Jitters doing that piece!” I also began to laugh and say, “Imagine the dream team of Jitters—you could pick your crew. That would be incredible.” Asking Haleem if he had ever trained in ballet or contemporary dance, he replies, “No, none. But I grew up in the fine arts though.” From a young age he had a talent for the visual arts inherited from his father. Haleem says, “My mother always put me in art school and she was really trying to hone my talents,” which he believes directly benefited his dance acumen.

In 2007, Haleem taught workshops and performed at the *Buck-n-Grind* event in Stockholm, Sweden and by 2010, Hardcore Detroit was voted best dance company in the *Real Detroit* Magazine Reader’s Poll. Haleem’s passion for researching, promoting, and performing Detroit’s indigenous dance form took him to China where he taught Jit master classes in Beijing and performed in Shanghai’s ninth Biennale.

Currently, within the Jit community, it is well-known that Haleem is a continuous force for pushing the culture forward, not only in Detroit, but also internationally. Jitter Tristan Hackney refers to Haleem as the “Mayor of Jit” because “he has done so much for the culture.” Tristan continues, “He was the person who coordinated the Jit versus

Juke¹⁶ battle. When I initially went to do a show in Chicago, I went with Stringz. He and I have done many shows together. He also coordinated the Jit versus house. And he has even traveled overseas, to a few different places, to actually teach them the culture of Jit, as well.” Bringing the Jit overseas fostered an intense curiosity in Haleem for understanding the roots of the Jit. In an interview with the Detroit Free Press in 2015, he details how this inquisitiveness lead him to the Jitterbugs:

This has been the one thing since I started Jitting that I asked questions about, since basically before 2000: where did this [dance] come from? I been out there asking questions, and their name, the Jitterbugs came up. And in particular, this one guy, Sundiata [O M Mausi] in Detroit, he was like, “I know these guys.” Mausi was a big-time musician who was from the same era. He knew the work of the Jitterbugs and played a huge role in making that connection happen. (“Bonus Content” 2015)

Mausi knew the Jitterbugs through their participation in Detroit’s Festival of the Performing Arts, which he co-founded with Motown recording artist Kim Weston. Mausi agreed to connect Haleem with the Jitterbugs for a special segment Haleem was producing for his YouTube channel. After an initial three-hour interview with Johnny and Tracy McGhee, Haleem realized that Johnny’s stories deserved an outlet beyond his YouTube channel that would give the history of the Jitterbugs the exposure they deserved.

In 2010, Haleem was awarded the Kresge Arts in Detroit award as a performing arts dance fellow, earning the title of “Dance Ambassador of Detroit.” With the film

¹⁶ Juke is a dance form under the umbrella of Chicago Footworking. Similar to Jit, Juke is a form of rapid footwork, however, Juke kicks more into the air where Jit kicks more into the ground.

preparation already underway, he used the grant resources to produce and direct his documentary *The Jitterbugs: Pioneers of the Jit* (2014). On the aesthetics of the documentary, Haleem explains his creative direction was highly influenced by the look and feel of Crazy Legs'¹⁷ film *The Freshest Kids* (2002), which “embodies the story of the rise of the b-boy in a paramount fashion.”

Who are the Jitterbugs? Documenting the Pioneers of the Jit

Haleem’s documentary focuses on the innovators of the Jit: Stanley Bowman, Tony Carasage, James McGhee, Johnny McGhee, and Tracey McGhee, however only James, Johnny, and Tracey McGhee appear in the documentary. The documentary presents the early life of the McGhee brothers, growing up in Detroit in the 1960s and 1970s, the various factors that contributed to creating their own distinct dance style, and notable key figures along the way, such as Motown singing star Kim Weston who helped shaped the Jitterbugs into a refined dance group. Even though the documentary emphasizes the history of the Jitterbugs, Haleem expounds that in the current Jit culture the original style of Jit created by the Jitterbugs is referred to as “traditional Jit,” versus the “contemporary Jit,” which is what Jitters are currently dancing in Detroit, which will be discussed further in Chapter Six.

In the beginning of the documentary, Haleem asks a few dancers what the Jit is and where it came from. Many of the dancers are able to easily explain the nuances of the dance form but do not know who was responsible for creating the Jit. As the documentary

¹⁷ Richard Colón (Crazy Legs) was an original member of the Rock Steady Crew from the Bronx, New York City.

demonstrates, the Jitterbugs were not commonly known in the Jit community and there were misconceptions about the word Jit and what it represented. According to Haleem, there is a common fallacy that the Jit originated from the social dance, the Jitterbug of the 1920s, as well as other social dances that were influenced by the Jitterbug, such as the Charleston, Black Bottom Stomp, and Lindy Hop. In fact, during interviews with different members of the Jit community some expressed that they see elements of the Jitterbug, Charleston, and Lindy Hop within the Jit, but were not sure if there was a direct link or influence on the Jitterbugs' original movements.¹⁸

Although the Jit is not actually a descendant of the 1920's Jitterbug, it does have some similarities to the context of the earlier dance form. Colloquially known as the "roaring twenties," the 1920s marks the decade that ushered in the jazz craze and the legal Prohibition of alcohol in the United States. Throughout the decade "you were what you danced," as individuals in major U.S. cities "defined themselves through choice and consumption of popular song and dance" (Cohen-Stratynner 2009, 217). Composed of energetic, acrobatic, and improvisational movements usually performed with a partner; the Jitterbug's name implies the jerky movements attributed to the exuberance of dancers during Prohibition, who had the "jitters" from drinking illegal booze in excess. Due to its frenetic vigor and rising popularity, the dance form rapidly circulated throughout the

¹⁸ For ethical purposes, I am not including the names of the people who had these particular feelings on the muddled history of the Jit because some of them expressed embarrassment that they had been Jitting for many years and were not aware of the Jit's origins.

United States. Constance Valis Hill details the ontological nature of the dance form, stating, “More than a step, the jitterbug was a style, a state of mind; a violent, even frenzied athleticism made it hazardous, exciting, sexual, and cathartic. The Jitterbugger became synonymous with the ‘hepcat,’ a swing addict” (2009, 235).

On the history behind the name of the Jitterbugs, the McGhee brothers do not cite the Jitterbug movements as influential upon the Jit, but rather, they adopted the “frenzied athleticism” and “hazardous” attitude attributed to people who danced the Jitterbug. In the 1970s, Detroit experienced a surge of crime and gang activity, largely fueled by unemployment and the influx of heroin and other illicit drugs being sold on the streets. During this era, the term Jitterbug became synonymous with criminal activity within street vernacular—a name indexical to crime and not a reference to the dance form from the 1920s. As the Jitterbugs were creating their own distinct style of dance, Stanley adopted the term Jitterbug to represent their dance group. In the documentary Johnny says, “Jitterbug was associated with crime and I’m not ashamed to say it, we were criminals in that respect” (*The Jitterbugs: Pioneers of the Jit* 2014). In fact, the Jitterbugs began as a gang of criminals stealing cars and breaking into stores.

Johnny clarifies that the Jitterbugs formed because they were a street gang. Tracey responds, “we stole a lot of cars back then,” and Johnny intercedes with a smile and says, “criminals—but I’m nice now, we’ve reformed” (VIRAL 313 2015). Tracey explains that the two names have elements in common, but the dances do not “because we’re from the street” (VIRAL 313 2015). The Jitterbugs had gained a certain type of reputation in their neighborhood, due to their extracurricular activities, in which people

would say look at them “Jits” go. This colloquialism stuck and contributed to the dance form being labeled as such. The name Jitterbugs was shortened to Jit, which also became a verb.

It should also be noted that before Haleem released the documentary on the Jitterbugs, there was incorrect information about the history and influences on the Jit on the Internet. One particular website, which is no longer available online, presented an essay written on the history of the Jit claiming the Black Bottom Stomp, which was an offshoot of the Jitterbug, influenced the creation of the Jit in Detroit. However, Haleem’s documentary dispels this misconception as the film’s narrator, John Mason (an iconic Detroit radio DJ “Mason in the Morning” and Detroit Pistons Basketball announcer) said, “although both dances [the Jitterbug and the Jit] stem from a sense of losing control and contain intricate steps and repetitions, one was not birthed from the other” (*The Jitterbugs: Pioneers of the Jit* 2014). Haleem clarifies and explains to me, “for a long time there was this big misconception with the Jitterbug from 1920s and 30s and the Jitterbugs, now. Although there is a similarity with the name, that doesn't mean we're talking about the same thing. The spirit of both dances is similar when you see them. You can see that they're fast but they're different.”

I ask Haleem to elaborate on the idea of “losing control,” because I saw the Jit as controlled and precise. He says:

There are many directions you can go with Jitting, so it can be controlled, you can be wild, it can be really fast it, can be just ridin' and groovin'. But there was a time in the 90s when the music just kept going faster and faster, so that's what people remember about the Jit. It being really fast. It can appear out of control because you going from the floor, you going up, you got these different angles,

you're dealing with armwork—just so many components to the dance. It could also just be someone's style, out of control.

I ask if the out of control element of the Jit could point to the unpredictability of the dance form and Haleem responds, “true dat, true dat. Even the Jitterbugs when you look at their movements, it's going fast but everything is precise.”

Over time, the McGhee brothers refined the technique and steps of the Jit, which eventually took precedence over engaging in criminal activity. As the Jit was emerging in Detroit, the hip hop movement was also developing in the boroughs of the Bronx and Manhattan, as well as parts of California. Hip hop culture had a similar effect on the criminal activity of New York City gangs as battles over territory were increasingly being fought with fists and weapons, but creatively through DJing, emceeing, b-boying and graffiti art. Nonetheless, the McGhee brothers sought to differentiate their style of Jit from the dances hailing from the East and West coasts. Johnny says, “it's not lockin,' it's not breakdancing,' it's not ballet” (*The Jitterbugs: Pioneers of the Jit*, 2014).

On the importance of releasing this documentary for Jitters within the culture, Detroit-based dancer Kenya “Standing Ovation” Sutton says, “I applaud Stringz [Haleem] for making the DVD on the Jitterbugs because a lot of people were just copying shuffles, combos, groundwork, but they didn't know the reason behind it. So, if you don't know the reason behind it how can you even play with it, how can you even know that you are not doing something that has already been done.” Also, other dancers I interviewed had been told that the Jit was a direct descendant of the Jitterbug and told me

they were grateful for Haleem's work to present the correct version of the Jitterbugs' history and their contributions to the Jit.

A loud, lingering creaky sound emanating from the back door abruptly interrupts my interview with Haleem. A few dancers enter the CCNDC, as the practice session is about to start. Realizing the time, Haleem offers his final thought, saying "So, if we didn't get the Jitterbug story, that possibly could have been lost in the shuffle. That would have been lost." I ask him, "Who do you think I absolutely need to interview and/or include in this dissertation?" And he replies, "I would say definitely the Jitterbugs." We quickly wrap up the interview and Haleem gives me Johnny McGhee's contact information. After thanking Haleem for his time and sharing his knowledge with me, I enter the dance floor space and begin slowly stretching up my cold, stiff muscles and joints. Haleem connects his smart phone to the speaker and the techno beats begin to play at exactly 7:30 pm.

**"The Originators, Not the Imitators:"
Johnny and Tracey McGhee**

On a rainy, soggy early-spring-in-Michigan Saturday afternoon, I had my first meeting with Johnny and Tracey McGhee at the Denny's Restaurant in Taylor, Michigan, a suburb outside of Detroit. I scurry into the restaurant and my teal and brown cheetah print umbrella is dripping water all over the vestibule of the restaurant's entrance. While shaking the rain off my umbrella, Johnny McGhee greets me and I think to myself, how does he know it was me? We have only spoken on the phone a few times prior to this meeting, in which he suggested that we meet at this particular Denny's in Taylor.

Greeting me with a big smile, we hug and introduce ourselves and I follow him to the back to the restaurant where his older brother Tracey is sitting at an oval shaped table. As I trail behind Johnny, I attempt to conceal my limping left leg, the result of a sprained Achilles tendon. I do not want to draw any attention to myself and have to explain that I injured myself while learning how to Jit, especially to two of the men who are responsible for creating the dance form back in the 1970s.

Johnny introduces me to Tracey, and I am instantly struck by his cool sense of style. He is wearing an old-school Cuban-inspired hat that perfectly matches the rest of his monotone but fashionable outfit. Johnny sports Detroit Lions regalia from almost head to toe: a white, silver, and blue Lions baseball cap, a white and blue Lions leather jacket, and all the other elements of his ensemble match harmoniously with the white, silver, and “Honolulu blue” motif of the hometown football team.

The brothers graciously invite me to sit down and to order something off the menu. They are quite hungry and already placed their orders with the waitress before I arrived. I explain that I am not hungry as I had already eaten and was more interested in talking to them. They make a light-hearted joke, “Oh, dancers...you know how they eat,” to which I laughed out loud. I quickly set up my “low-tech” system for recording their interview. I place my iPad on the table to videotape and position my iPhone close to the brothers to record the audio from the interview. However, what follows less resembles a conventional interview and more a whirlwind conversation among friends.

Denny’s is overflowing with generous sized plates of food, energy, and noise, as many large families are out dining for Saturday lunch. As the brothers begin to speak, I

am worried if the technology will be able to pick up their voices over the booming energy of the restaurant. However, shortly after they begin talking about their experience with Haleem and the documentary he produced on them, I let go of the fear by letting the brothers lead the interview process. Even though I had prepared and printed my script of interview questions based on Haleem's documentary, what ensues is more of a conversation led by the brothers; they tell me what *they* want me to know.

Instead of beginning the interview/conversation in the distant past, Johnny begins talking about the preview screening event of Haleem's documentary on the Jitterbugs, which took place in 2015 at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit. With passion in his voice, Johnny's nostalgia-tinged words bridge the gap between the early beginnings of the Jit and the present day, giving a sense of coming full-circle. He says, "It's amazing to me. That dance [Jit], we didn't think of it as being pioneers, we thought of it as a choice that we made to do this particular dance. We could have put [danced] popping and locking but we stayed loyal to just the Jit."¹⁹ Johnny continues:

it's not that we couldn't physically do it [poppin and locking], but we wanted it to just stay as the Jit. I thought after so many years had passed, you have peaks and you have valleys, and some of those valleys stayed for a while. And I'm thinking, did I do the right thing? And that question was answered, yes you did at the Charles Wright Museum at the documentary screening. We heard the comments as they [the audience] watched and during the funny parts, they started laughing and I'm thinking, wow, we sitting right there with them. The showing was over, and Haleem said, we got them in the house tonight, come on up here fellas. We went up there and they gave us a six-minute standing ovation. And it was

¹⁹ Johnny's mention of popping and locking is referring to the West Coast style of hip hop dance, emerging in the early 1970s, the same time the brothers were creating the Jit in Detroit.

totally...I did the right thing. That moment, we stood there, we almost had to say y'all sit down.

Johnny explains that when he was growing up in Detroit there were no white people in his neighborhood and as such, was shocked to see that half of the audience in attendance were Caucasian. He says:

We went from Grand River and Chicago [Streets] and there was no white people at Grand River and Chicago. There was no white people when we was stealing and breaking in and splitting the loot. So, that night it must have been fifty percent white in the building. I knew at that moment that I didn't waste my time with that. I was questioning, man was this a waste? Should I have went ahead and pursued being a lawyer? That night at the Charles Wright, all the love from white people... I could not believe it. You look at the DVD and you see me standing up there smiling and it's so real. I was shocked.

Tracey chimes in, "you know, accepting applause, after bowing and coming back up, and they are still clapping, I didn't know what to do. I'm lost within myself. I don't know what to do, I'm honored. I can't believe this is happening. This is a true story." One can watch this scene in the documentary, where it appears that there was not one empty seat in the museum's theatre and people were standing in the back of the theatre, suggesting that the event was perhaps standing-room only. Clearly, the documentary premiere was significant for both brothers, given the time they devoted to speaking about it. Johnny continues talking about the electric night at the Charles H. Wright Museum, explaining that his son was in the audience, he shares a story that is very special for him. At that time, his son was getting ready to go to college at the Ohio State University to study automotive engineering and his tuition and dorm room were already paid. After leaving the documentary screening event, Johnny's son says to him, while driving home, "you know, I really don't want to go to college, can you teach me everything you know?" and

Johnny says, “I thought to myself, that was special. Because if my son was influenced in that way, the love that all the people showed confirmed to me I did the right thing with my life. But it tickled me, and I had to say to him, no, I want you to go to school. It’s going to be a long-term investment for you that’s going to carry you way further that I could possibly carry you.”

The Jit’s Original Steps: Traditional versus Contemporary

When I ask Johnny if his son knows how to Jit, the tone and the direction of our conversation drastically changes. According to Johnny, he taught his son how to Jit when he was seven years old, but he doesn’t Jit today. I ask Johnny if he taught him the traditional Jit or contemporary Jit and he responds, “the traditional, I couldn’t teach him the contemporary.” Both Johnny and Tracey feel that the contemporary style of Jit is “academic,” “generic,” and “watered down” as they haven’t seen anyone do their original steps in the correct form. Johnny says, “It’s like if you learn math or trigonometry, you can only do it one way. There is no sugar-coating it, watering it down, you can’t do it that way. You have to do it the right way. I’m sure we could learn the contemporary Jit but for us, it is just not feasible. It would be like doing something wrong.” Tracey says, “the more I think about it, it’s an insult,” and Johnny quickly replies, “that’s his old Jitterbug coming out of him,” at which all three of us laugh.

On the fundamentals of the traditional Jit, the Jitterbugs relied on four movements around which they crafted their choreography: the drop, the strike, the walk, and the duck walk. Johnny describes these steps in the following way:

The dance was about not looking sweet or feminine. One of the moves called the drop is something that we just started doing. And after a drop there is nothing else but a strike, it is like a movement of bringing your knee toward your chest. The drop and the strike were like brother and sister, they went hand-in-hand. The walk, the drop, and the strike are the three basic steps that locked our network to build on other moves. There were so many moves, for example after a drop we would go into a duck walk. The duck walk is standing close to the floor with both knees bent and the hands swaying back and forth. The three basic moves inspired the duck walk and hands with so many different moves. At the time we were Jitting nobody was doing these movements and we never wanted to do the same movements within a routine twice. Everyone was popping and locking and when the 80s hit everyone was breaking. We never crossed the line; we continued to evolve the movement, which is the Jit, we stayed with our Jit. (Reed 2014, 26)

While executing the drop, one drops straight down to the floor and the knees can be positioned in a parallel or turned out position, staying planted on one or both feet.²⁰ The strike, utilitarian in title, denotes a literal striking of the floor with one foot. The leg lifts off the ground, emanating from the bent knee, and then strikes itself back into the ground, executed with a flat foot. The walk, also utilitarian in its title, the step “walks” around the space with the feet crossing behind one another in a stylized way, giving the impression that one is walking quickly or running in place.

Another fundamental element that Johnny did not mention in his statement is the jazz-it, also a locomotor movement, which could be compared to the step “sugars” from the tap dance lexicon. The dancer must stay on the balls of the feet in order to push the inside of both heels forward, with one foot following the other. In other words, on the

²⁰ Haleem notes that even though drops are utilized in breaking, there is a distinct difference in the directionality of the drop. Jitters drop straight down to the floor as opposed to b-boys/girls dropping with their upper bodies positioned on a diagonal axis.

balls of the feet, when the heel comes forward, the whole leg, from the knee down, pivots in and out, alternating between the right foot and the left.

The drop is arguably one of the only stand-alone movements that is still performed in the contemporary Jit. However, Johnny made clear that the main difference between the original drop and the contemporary drop is that the Jitterbugs almost never used their hands to catch the bottom of their drop on the floor. As an example, when Johnny and Tracey performed for the judges on *So You Think You Can Dance* (SYTYCD), Johnny not only executed a drop in which his hands never touched the floor, but his upper body remained upright, with no tilting forward from the hips. In a conversation I had with Haleem during a practice session on Jit's contemporary drop he mentioned that dropping to the ground, catching the floor with your hands with the upper body close to the floor and the elbows turned sharply outwards from the body is a very "Detroit" thing, a clear example of the changes made to the Jitterbugs' drop.

These movements, in their original form, are not completely visible as stand-alone moves (except the drop) in the contemporary style of Jit. That said, during an interview Haleem expressed that through his distinct style of Jitting he is attempting to keep the original steps of the Jit alive. Haleem says, "the one thing I try to implement, is focusing on classic Jit styles by merging the classic and contemporary, which I don't think a lot of people do unless you see OG's doing their style." He continues, "I'm trying to fuse—because in contemporary they are just straight doing it a certain way. They are not really thinking about how it was done back in the day." I ask, "Are you creating a hybrid style of the old and the new?" Haleem says, "Yes, that's what I'm doing. That's my goal—and

to innovate as well.” In my interview with the McGhee brothers, I mentioned the fact that Haleem is one of the few Jitters who is attempting to keep the original steps of the Jitterbugs alive by incorporating them into his contemporary style. Tracey responds, “from one dancer to another, I give him the rights to do what he wants with the Jit because he brought us back to life, as far as I’m concerned.” On Haleem, Johnny also says, “What I see in him is his love for the dance, like what we used to love. Before my son was born, when I first started Jitting, I loved it like he [Haleem] loves it today.” Both brothers clearly value how Haleem has created an awareness of the Jitterbugs through the documentary.

On their segment on *SYTYCD* when the brothers introduce themselves to the judges, Nigel Lythgoe, Mary Murphy, and Twitch, Tracey proclaims, “We are the originators, not the imitators,” which prompted loud “ohhs” and “ahhs” from not only the audience but the judges as well. Commenting on their *SYTYCD* appearance, Tristan says to me, “I was like, oh my god, this is so dope—the McGhee Brothers finally get some notoriety! Now people can actually see on national television these are the pioneers that did it. This is what they started from here—this is our legacy. And they bridged that gap between new school and ‘OG’ old school.” OG is a reference to the term “original gangster,” a colloquialism that shows reverence to Jitters who paved the way for younger generations who have followed in their footsteps.

Even though the brothers share strong feelings on how the practice of the Jit has changed their original steps over the years, they are at the same time grateful that the youth have preserved the Jit. Johnny explains to the judges, “The new generation [of

Jitters] has kept it alive, which is a beautiful thing. We love the energy; how strong they are. I remember when I was that strong” (VIRAL 313 2015).

When Lythgoe asks the brothers if they have noticed the “little nuances” of the movements that have changed or been forgotten over the years, Tracey responds that the Jit has evolved through “three of four different stages, from the basics to a little more extra rhythm to supersonic speed to SUPERSONIC SPEED!” Tracey’s comment reflects the fact that with the advent of techno music in Detroit, as the tempo of the music sped up, so did the movements of the Jit. During the initial years of the Jit, the McGhee brothers Jitted to popular music heard on the radio. Tracy states, “Whatever the hottest record out, that was the one we were going to dance to. If there was a breakdown in the record it would really feature our movement” (Reed 2014, 28). Johnny clarifies, “For example, “Brick House” by the Commodores—that was a breakdown we used. We lived for the breakdowns in songs” (ibid).²¹ As techno music emerged in the early 1980s, the Jit was being appropriated and embellished by other dancers in the city of Detroit and Jitting became synonymous with techno. Whereas the McGhee brothers relished dancing to a song’s breakdown, in techno music most tracks are devoid of melodic lyrics making the entire song essentially a breakdown. As Tracy states, “Techno has this drive to it that it is a continuous breakdown and it never stops” (ibid). In this respect, techno offered the perfect counterpart for the Jit.

²¹ The breakdown in pop music generally eliminates the vocals and melodic instrumentation in order to highlight the percussive elements of the track.

However, the speed of standard techno tracks was significantly faster than the pop songs of 1970s, causing the speed of the Jit to dramatically increase. Johnny said of this shift:

It's funny how the evolution of the dance is going, because back then we were not dancing that fast, and now it is taking the beauty away from the way the groove should go. There was no techno back then, maybe if there was we would have danced this way. We had to deal with what we did have, which was Average White Band and Parliament Funkadelic, for example. (Reed 2014, 29)

After the tempo of the Jit increased dramatically, intricate footwork became the most important and celebrated aspect of the contemporary iteration of the Jit. Tracy says:

Because the music has changed people would not see the true essence of the smoothness that we brought to this dance form, and nowadays techno has the youth moving so fast you can barely take a breath to finish the first move. But when the funk was out there it was a nice smooth flow within the movement that is missing today. (Reed 2014, 31)

Johnny responds, "Today there is not enough time to execute the moves, so it can't come across to the audience" (ibid). Although dancers of different generations hold different ideas on what tempo or genre of music the Jit should be danced to, both the traditional and contemporary forms of Jit are predicated on precisely reflecting the rhythmic nuances occurring in the musical score. In other words, Jitting "off-beat" at whatever speed the tempo may be is not permissible for either style of Jit.

But even before the speed of techno started changing the Jit, Johnny admits that their own steps went through an evolutionary process as they transitioned from the five members to the three brothers, saying "We actually changed steps because we started out with some really basic steps" (VIRAL 313 2015). Originally, the philosophy behind the Jitterbugs was that the strength was in the group form. What made the Jitterbugs so dynamic was the choreographed unison among all five members. However, in a rare

performance consisting of solo/duet work, Johnny recounts a magical moment:

Me and Tony, we'd go out there and do our routine and then my brother [James] and Big Stan, they would go out and do their routine and come back. And he [Tracey] would go out and do his own routine. And in his routine, sometimes he would tumble... round-off 1-2-3-4-5. At this point, we had the baggy pants with suit jackets on and we had a little handkerchief right here (pointing to his jacket pocket). And he [Tracey] went out there punched for the back flip, and his handkerchief came out, he rotated, he landed and caught the handkerchief. The crowd though it was part of the act, they went wild.

Tracey responds, "it was a freak accident," and Johnny says, "it was a one-in-a-million kind of thing. It flipped out in mid-air and because of the centrifugal force of his flip, it caught the wind and stayed up in the air until he landed." And I ask, "There was no VHS camera rolling?" Johnny replies, "There was no tape. Only for the people who were there that witnessed that for the first time. A lot of shows that we did, incredible things happened, but there was never videotape."

As the waitress quickly places the "Grand Slam" breakfast platters on the table, overflowing with pancakes, eggs, golden buttery toast, and many other breakfast items, I am in the middle of asking Johnny and Tracey to fill in the gaps on the development between the traditional and contemporary styles of Jit. However, as I know how hungry they are, I begin to do most of the talking.

I explain that Haleem showed me the Jit dance tutorial, which was a companion DVD with the *Jitterbugs: Pioneers of the Jit* documentary. In the tutorial, Haleem presented the fundamental movements of the traditional Jit, performed by Tracey McGhee, himself, and the contemporary Jit, danced by Haleem, Mike Manson, and Queen Gabby. After watching the tutorial numerous times, I was looking for specific

visible connections between the traditional and contemporary styles, as an indication of how they blended or progressed into something new. I had my own theory, based on movement analysis and my own embodied knowledge by taking Jit classes and learning at Haleem's practice sessions. I was curious to know what Tracey and Johnny thought about my analysis.

Examining the walk and the jazz-it separately, I told them, it seems that someone along the line combined the two, which created one of the fundamental elements of the contemporary Jit: the shuffle. There are many variations of the shuffle and most of them do not have their own names. Any standard shuffle will contain a kick or kicks in various directions; pivots of the feet turning inwards and outwards, similar to the motion of the jazz-it; a distinct rhythmic pattern of the feet, similar to the walk, involving numerous changes of weight between both feet; and usually a symmetrical directional pattern, or in other words, what is performed on the right side of the body must be reciprocated on the left side. Tracey agrees that, "those two steps became the Jit." To clarify, I say, "So the jazz-it and..." Tracey quickly exclaims, "and the walk combined together is the Jit." Johnny says, "You are good," and I reply, "I've been researching you guys," and he replies, "No doubt, I can hear your language."

**Influences:
Daddy's Rhythm, Prince,
The Jackson 5, The Nicholas Brothers, and Motown**

Asking the brothers who their greatest influences were, they explain that their father had a considerable impact on their dancing career. Even though their father was not a dancer or an entertainer, but an autoworker on the assembly line at General Motors,

he was one of the McGhee brothers' greatest influences on their approach to dancing. I ask how long their father worked on the line and Johnny responds, "It must have been five-six years." Johnny then asks me, with a reserved look on his face, "Do you want to know what he did afterwards?" I respond, "Yes," and Johnny hesitates to respond. Tracey then says, "Go ahead and tell her." Johnny continues to tell a story that changed family life in the McGhee household dramatically. One day their father came home and called a family meeting. At the meeting he had a paper bag in hand, he set it down on the table and said, "This is the way it's gonna be." According to Johnny, the paper bag was filled with heroin and from that moment on he quit his job at General Motors and started selling heroin on the street. I ask if this occurred in the early 1980s and Johnny responds, "Well, matter of fact it would have been the late 70s. I can tell you why because today [in Detroit] you will have ten crack houses on one block. Back then, he was the only one in the whole neighborhood selling it. You had to be brave to sell back then. There was no fifty crack houses in the neighborhood." Johnny then says, "While all of this was going on upstairs, we were downstairs rehearsing." For the brothers, their basement was their sanctuary, keeping them from following in their father's footsteps. They mentioned that their father was very adamant in telling them the wrath they would face if he ever found out his sons were selling drugs.

The brothers continued to explain that even though their father was not a dancer, he did have one signature move. Both Johnny and Tracey demonstrated this movement, while sitting at the table, which could be compared to a slight bounce of the upper body, with both arms bent at the elbows, moving slightly up and down, like baby chicken wings

would move. I ask, “And did this dance movement make it into your Jit anywhere?” and both brothers reply through their laughter, “No way!” I ask, “It was too old fashioned?” and Tracey responds, “Yes, too old fashioned.” Johnny shares that their father didn’t attend many of their performances, but he would periodically go down into the basement where most of the Jitterbug rehearsals occurred. During one particular rehearsal session, their father gave them advice that stuck with them throughout their performance career. Johnny says, “The first thing he told us, first, you get their attention.” Tracey continues, “And then he said, in the middle, you do something special. Then he said, don’t forget at the end, the grand finale. There’re three things you gonna have to do: get em’, keep em’, kill em’.”

I ask, “Where do you think your father learned this from?” since he did not dance. Johnny replies, “That’s a good question, right! That’s a very good question.” Tracey responds, “You have to be street-savvy. He was a young kid on his own taking care of his mother. So, by the time he started selling drugs he had street-credibility. He has wisdom out of this world.” Johnny explains that people from their neighborhood called him “Papa Smurf, because they would all gather around him and just listen to his stories.” Johnny continues, “And so your question, where you asked where he could have got that advice from, I don’t know and that’s why I say that’s a very good question because his background doesn’t dictate any of that, it’s just his wisdom of knowing how people like things and how people are entertained, I would imagine.”

On the positive attributes their father instilled in the brothers, notably a strong sense of rhythmic musicality, Johnny says:

My daddy, all of our rhythm came from him, he would play records like, Bill Withers, I didn't even know who Bill Withers was. But now he's [my father] gone and when I hear Bill Withers's songs I have to listen to them. I even went out and bought some Bill Withers. He would listen to Lou Rawls, Bobby Womack. He would listen to all those classic guys and that music would be pumping in the house.

Asking what other types of music they performed their Jit routines to throughout their dancing career, most of their energetic responses came in song-form. Johnny for example begins singing Parliament Funkadelic's "Give Up the Funk" (1975) in his low baritone register: "tear the roof off the sucka, tear the roof off the sucka!" Johnny explains, "This song meant so much to our group and I want you to know that we never did the same routine at any show. Ever! As five members, our tag was to do a new routine every show. And we had a new song every single show." I ask, "So, not only would you not repeat songs, you wouldn't repeat choreography?" Johnny emphatically states, "Never repeat choreography!" Johnny asks me if I had ever heard of Hamilton Bohannon and his song "Let's Start a Dance," which was released in 1978. I was not familiar with Hamilton Bohannon and Johnny and Tracey, in tag-team fashion, sing the melody and percussion of the song, attempting to jog my memory. They sing, "Come on and do it! come on and do it!" Perplexed because I had never heard that song before, Johnny clarifies, during the song's breakdown, "all the instruments would stop, and it was just the percussion. It was really special for us, it inspired us to continue and that *might* have been a song we repeated on a different show because we absolutely enjoyed that song" as it "can grab your soul." Johnny continues to explain that it was a very powerful song from "their era" and it "made them proud" of being dancers.

Tracey explains, “You know what song a lot of people don’t know that we danced to— Prince,” and Johnny answers, “Party Up,” (1980). As soon as the brothers mention Prince, I instantly sit taller in the booth. Feeling my body temperature rise a few degrees, I explain that Prince has been my musical muse since I first heard the Electrifying Mojo play his obscure tracks on Detroit’s underground radio, when I was quite young. In this split second, I wanted the brothers to know how much I appreciated Prince’s musical genius—more than the average listener. I reach into my bag, pull out my soft sunglasses case, which on both sides has a black and white printed image of Prince’s self- titled 1979 album cover, *Prince*. In this image, Prince is blankly staring into the camera lens, wearing no shirt with his hair perfectly feathered on both sides of his face. I hold up the sunglasses case and say, “Prince is everything.” Tracey says, “Ok!” in a very surprised tone and both brothers laugh.

On Prince, Johnny continues, “When we talk about tempo...” and Tracey interjects, “The tempo with the Jit is everything. It’s everything.” Johnny explains, that “at one point “Party Up” was the fastest song that we were doing. Every time we performed it, if we were in a competition, we won first place.” Tracey confirms by saying, “Every time.” Johnny shares a story about a talent show they auditioned for at Cass Technical high school, in Detroit. He explains:

We got there late. And he [the chairman of the committee] said everybody gone, you still want to do it? I said, yeah. He said, ok, and we gave him “Party Up.” And the song starts out REAAAAARRRRRRRRRR! [Tracey and Johnny begin singing the melody and the bass-line of the song.] So, there’s the chairman of the committee and all his other people had left who had judged the competition. When we finished, he [Prince] says, “WE DON’T WANT TO FIGHT NO MORE!” He was singing about the war. And we ended it with that, right on cue

with a split. By time we got to “more” we in the split and the song is over. That guy said, “you know what, y’all in.”

Tracey responds with a simple, “yeah” and starts to laugh. Johnny continues, “So, when we got to the [talent] show, we gonna do Prince “Party Up.” Somehow, they would kind of always save us for last. Finally, that song came on: REAAAAARRRRRRRRRRR!”

Tracey and Johnny again sing the melody, base-line, and percussion of the song. “It was rocking,” Tracey says, and Johnny confirms that they won first place and “ripped the show.” I ask, “and did you ever perform Prince again?” and Johnny responds, “Yes, yes, but it was just “Party Up,”” apparently the only exception to the earlier mentioned rule that the Jitterbugs never perform the same choreography twice. I ask, “Did you ever dance to any other Prince songs?” and Tracey begins coyly singing “I knew a girl named Nikki, I guess you could say she was a sex fiend;” Johnny and I began to sing along. Through my laughter, I respond, “Darling Nikki! That would have been too X-rated.” And in that moment, I remember thinking to myself, as amazing as that song is, it is much too slow to Jit to, even for 1980s standards.

Beyond our connection over Prince, the brothers explain that their style of Jit was particularly influenced by the male groups from Motown who incorporated precision choreography into their performances, such as the Temptations, and the flash tap aesthetic of the Nicholas Brothers. But their greatest influence, they admit, was the Jackson 5, whose style had much more impact on the Jitterbugs than any other dance group or style that was popular in the late 1960s into the early 1970s. Despite these influences, Johnny says at the end of the day, “it was still our [Jitterbugs] style.” As an

example, he explains that the Jackson 5 “were so good at their claps.” The sound and execution of the claps of their hands and the stomps of their feet were so clean, a detail that the Jitterbugs did not just mimic in their own choreography, but over time developed upon, which influenced their creation of strike. The Jitterbug strike incorporated the clean stomps of the Jackson 5, but they inserted a stylized emphasis on the knee coming up, rather than the foot stomping into the floor.

Johnny also explains that during the late 1960s, most of the all-male, African American music and dance groups that he recalled seeing on television hailed from Motown, such as the Temptations and the Four Tops, were grown men. As Johnny was quite young in the late 1960s, he couldn’t “see” himself in these adult dance collectives but found many parallels with the Jackson 5, with the main commonality being that the Jackson 5 were brothers, just like Johnny, Tracey, and James. And when the Jitterbugs were finally formed, they, too, had five members. Johnny says “imagine you see these black kids on TV, there were no other groups like them. The Jackson 5 was the first kid group in the world, so how can you not be influenced?”

Continuing to discuss other influences on the Jitterbugs, Johnny asks me, “Have you ever heard of Clifford Fears?” I respond, “Yes, from Haleem’s documentary. He was a Dunham technique dancer.” The brothers explain that they were introduced to Fears during Kim Weston’s Festival for the Arts Program and he was responsible for introducing the brothers to the artistry of Nicholas Brothers. According to Johnny, Fears and Weston changed the trajectory of their lives. Kim Weston was a Motown singing star best known for the song “Takes Two,” a duet with Marvin Gaye. Weston was one of the

Jitterbugs' most notable mentors, responsible for taking the Jitterbugs out of the street and transforming them into a polished performance group. In 1977, Weston founded the Festival of the Performing Arts in Detroit, displaying the talents of local youth in the genres of dance, singing, and music, to name a few. Weston's revolutionary mission was to prove to kids from the streets of Detroit that they could accomplish extraordinary things.

Ze'ev Chafets notes the dream team staff Weston hired for the Festival, most of them hailing from Motown:

For her faculty, Weston chose Motown alumni—Beans Bowels, the music director of the Motown Review; Hank Cosby, who played horn on many of the old Motown hits; former personal director Dorothy Carrey; Teddy Harris Jr., who worked with Diana Ross and the Supremes; costume designer Margret Brown, who created the stage outfits for the Temptations and other Motown acts, and a number of others. She recruited them both for their professional skills and as role models for aspiring teenage performers. (Chafets 2013, x)

This impressive roster also included Clifford Fears, a Detroit native who toured with Katherine Dunham's dance company in Europe in the late-1950s, and maintained his own dance company, Clifford Fears Dance Theatre, in Detroit in the mid-1970s.

When the brothers were participating in Weston's Festival for the Performing Arts, they were exposed to highly talented and professional industry people, which had an indelible impact on the development of their performance style. Johnny explains that Weston held talent competitions for the participants of the Festival of the Arts and the winner(s) had the opportunity to travel to Idlewild, Michigan "to put on a show like the old Motown people." Idlewild has a lengthy history within the entertainment industry, too extensive to detail in this dissertation. However, it is important to note that Idlewild, a weekend

getaway and summer-long destination for African Americans, was referred to as the “Black Eden of Michigan,” as it was “one of the few places African Americans could find peace of mind and could escape systematic practices of racism and discrimination” (Stephens 2001, 13). African Americans could purchase and own land in Idlewild, which was not the case throughout most of the United States at this time. Idlewild had two nightclubs, The Flamingo Club and The Paradise Club, which attracted well-known entertainers, such as The Four Tops, Della Reese, Jackie Wilson, Lottie “the Body” Tatum-Graves, the Rhythm Kings, the Harlem Brothers, and several other performers throughout the 1950s and mid-1960s (Stephens 2001, 11). On their experience at Idlewild, Johnny explains, “From Friday to Sunday we performed all those days in Idlewild, and it was a beautiful experience.”

On Weston’s mentorship, Haleem states:

So, the brothers were from the street and mentored by Kim Weston and she brought them around some industry people. So, that’s where they were able to get that molding and shaping. She being from Motown, Motown did talent development a certain way and it inspired Kim Weston to do her festival in the same way.

Between the mentoring of Weston and Fears, and the top-shelf talent acts the Jitterbugs were exposed to during the Festival for the Performing Arts and at Idlewild, the street gang was transformed into a performance collective.

In the *SYTYCD* television segment, after Lythgoe saw the brothers perform their style of Jit he asks if they had ever seen the Nicholas Brothers perform. Tracey explains to Lythgoe that Fears was the one that introduced the flash tap style to the brothers and says, “They [Nicholas brothers] humbled us, they humbled our act. Because once we saw

them, we realized, dance is universal” (VIRAL 313 2015). During our interview, I didn’t ask Tracey to clarify this comment, but based on conversations we had about their experience on the show, I believe he wanted the judges to know that the Jitterbugs had created their own athletic style before they were introduced to the Nicholas Brothers and were not just an imitation of them.

I asked the brothers to take me through their experience on SYTYCD as I was curious how they got their own seven-minute segment on the show. Johnny explains:

When the valley was low, I had been working a lot and we hadn’t performed in six years or something like that. Tracey called me on the phone and said we gotta go down there tomorrow so we can be on *So You Think You Can Dance*. I said, what are you talking about? It turns out Haleem’s wife, Mary, got picked and she could bring three or four guests. So, that’s how we were going to get in there. I was like, man, come on, we gotta walk through some of this stuff. Because when we get up there, I want to be ready man, you just called me yesterday.

Even so, their segment was not pre-planned. Tracey and Johnny went into the basement, practicing their movements and routines in case they had an opportunity to be highlighted on the program. Johnny explains, “One of the associate producers took a break to come use the bathroom [in the basement] and he saw us dancing. He said, man, you all going up there and we said, no, we are guests. He said, no, no—he saw some sweet moves and he took us straight to the stage.” Johnny explains that the associate producer brought them upstairs immediately to meet the judges and “he threw us in front of Nigel and he [Nigel] was like...” Tracey finishes, “who are these guys?” Johnny explains that their first encounter did not get off on the right foot as Nigel condescendingly asks them if they were hijacking the show, to which Johnny snappily responds, “hijacking, what you

mean hijacking? That guy [the associate producer] just came down in the basement, this is our city, you are here as a visitor, what you mean saying hijacking the show.”

The producers of the show decided they wanted Tracey and Johnny to perform onstage during their own segment and asked the brothers what music they wanted to dance to, because they needed to obtain copyright clearance. Johnny says, “Because they couldn’t figure out which song we could do without a copyright, I said, ok, we will do it with no music. We will do it acapella. Because, we are the originators, it doesn’t matter, we can do it with nothing.” However, for both brothers, this had strong implications on how the Jit was perceived by the judges. Tracey explains that “the music is just as important as the [Jit] routine,” and because they had no choice but to dance acapella, “that stole something from the Jit.” Johnny continues, “It did steal because we didn’t have no music with it. And they [the judges] thinking it look like the Nicholas Brothers—some tap dance.” Johnny was wearing a black tuxedo with shiny black dress shoes and Tracey a cream-colored suit with dark-cream dress loafers; it is conceivable that the judges might have considered their dance style to be a “throwback,” based on their attire. The brothers express if they could have performed to the music they requested, the judges would not have easily compared their style to the Nicholas Brothers. Without the music, any rhythms created by their feet, notably the scuffing sounds generated from performing strikes, the jazz-it, drops, and other acrobatics elements created its own rhythmic score, is reminiscent of soft-shoe tap. As there is so little information on the Jit, the brothers do not want their legacy chalked up to being imitators of any person, group, or style of dance. They have much pride in what they created because their choreography was

predicated on being distinctive, innovative, and taking dance to places it had not been in the city of Detroit. As a final word on their performance, Johnny says, “If I could have got the right music, we would have did Prince, “Party Up”!”

By the time the Jitterbugs’ tenure with Kim Weston and the Festival of the Arts ended, in the late 1980s to early 1990s, the Jitterbugs were a well-known dance group in the city. They participated less in local talent competitions as they began to receive more and more paid gigs in Detroit and other U.S. major cities. On their career transition, Detroit dancer Reggie “Munch” Turner, who shared performance spaces with the Jitterbugs throughout the years explains to me that “what they [the Jitterbugs] did, in my opinion, they took it from the streets to the stage. So, it went from urbanism to professionalism. They innovated and created things and made their own contribution, where everybody else was just doing it for territorial reasons. They took something trivial and made it pivotal entertainment.” The Jitterbugs secured lucrative performance contracts at various auto shows, in places like Detroit, Chicago, and Miami. During this time, the original members of the Jitterbugs disbanded, with Stanley leaving first, followed by Tony.

With only the three McGhee brothers left, the remaining Jitterbugs transitioned from a dance group to a rap group in the early 1990s, despite their earlier statement about their resolve to differentiate their style of Jit from breaking from the Bronx and pop locking from California. As hip hop was gaining national and international recognition during this time, they changed their image to reflect the times and to become more marketable. Beyond this rationale, Johnny and Tracey didn’t discuss the details or history

of this remixed version of the Jitterbugs. However, this small detail is significant to arc of the Jit—a premonition of sorts because by the time hip hop culture spread to almost every continent on the globe, the Jit had still not migrated far outside of Detroit’s city limits. As the waitress refills our water glasses and swiftly clears all of the empty plates from our table, I am surprised how fast the time had passed. The frenzied lunch rush at Denny’s is over. One of the final stories the brothers share with me details an incident that could have had a very different outcome for their future as a rap group if they would have only made one phone call. The three McGhee brothers were in Miami, performing as the Jitterbugs at the Miami auto show. Tracey continues:

We are down in Miami, on Biscayne Boulevard. Anyone that’s been to Miami knows that Biscayne is the hottest spot to be. So, we were performing [at the auto show] and after one of the shows a white guy walked up to us and said hey man, I got a card, I’m working with this guy and you all need to call him tomorrow. Give him a call and go down and see him and he actually put y’all on. And we looked at the card and it said Luke. This was before 2 Live Crew.

With wide eyes, I respond, “Luke Skywalker,” and Johnny says, “right.” The next morning Johnny wakes up and called the number. He explains, “I called him up. It was him [Luke.] Luke said, yeah, my friend told me... where you at? I said, Biscayne, we be around at three o’clock. I hung up the phone and I started telling them, come on, let’s go check this guy out. We didn’t know who he is.” This occurred right before the 2 Live Crew gained huge mainstream success in the United States. Johnny explains that his oldest brother James was skeptical of Luke’s intentions and said, “Man, who is this guy? We ain’t going down there, we don’t know this guy. Little did we know, we would have been in H-Town place,” which was an R & B vocal group produced by Luke that had a

short-lived success in the 1990s. Johnny continues, “If we had made that phone call, we would have been with Luke.” I ask, “So, you didn’t make the phone call?” and Tracey responds, “no. We were making money we never made before,” from the auto show circuit. With the money they were making, they were also getting their first taste of fame, outside of being “Detroit famous.” Johnny says, “there was a club in Miami called G-Wiz and the owner was at one of the auto shows and after he sent us five limousines to pick us up to bring us to the club. And the girl who starred in the movie *48 Hours*, she was in there and Tracey was trying to talk to her. The big old body guards were like, back up, man, back up.” Tracey loudly interjects, “this is Miami Vice! This is Miami Vice!” Laughing, I say, “Tubbs and Crockett,” to which Tracey and Johnny, in perfect unison, exclaim “right!”

Johnny finishes the story and explains, “So, we didn’t have a clue who Luke was. But it’s amazing that opportunity could have been something that we would have never known— it could have propelled us to another level. However, Tracey proclaims, “but I’m glad we didn’t hook up with him because he stole from everybody anyways. Johnny clarifies Tracey’s statement:

Luke didn’t pay nobody. H-Town, if you look and find them today, they probably holding up a sign “Will Work for Food.” Luke is a street dude and we are street dudes and sometimes if you are not friends, you are gonna clash. Street dudes. Because my brother James, he’s not holding him up. Because if Luke said the wrong thing, he going straight off on em’.

As Tracey finishes telling the details of the story, looking at his phone, he too is surprised at how fast the time had passed and says that he has to leave. The interview was only scheduled for one hour but ended up lasting almost two hours. Tracey says, “It was a

pleasure meeting you,” and I thoroughly thank him and Johnny for sharing their time with me, mentioning that I want to schedule a follow-up interview within a few weeks. They both happily agree and say they will be in touch. As Johnny and Tracey begin to place cash on the table, I clutch the bill in my hand and insist on paying. It is the least I can do as they shared incredible information about their personal lives and the origins of the Jit. We say our final goodbyes and I wait until they exit Denny’s before I walk to the register to pay the bill, to avoid them witnessing my Jit-related limp.

After I leave Denny’s, I sit in the driver’s seat of my car and begin to reexamine the script of interview questions I had prepared to ask the brothers. Out of thirty questions, I was able to ask them one. Again, this was less an interview and more of an oral history journey that traversed quickly, although not linearly, through various points in time and location. Further scanning my list of unanswered interview questions, there is one in particular that I regret I didn’t get to ask Johnny. Towards the end of Haleem’s documentary, Johnny reflects on the trajectory of the Jit and states, “It was almost something to almost nothing.” Because I want to understand the particular events and/or emotional ties behind this profound response, with my pen, I mark this unanswered question with a large question mark and place the script back in my purple accordion dissertation folder.

**From Denny’s to the DIA:
“It was almost something to almost nothing”**

Two months after our first interview at Denny’s in Taylor, Michigan, I set up a follow-up interview with Johnny and he proposes we meet at the Detroit Institute of Arts

(DIA). Johnny suggests that it would be interesting to continue our interview among great works of art, such as Diego Rivera's iconic *Detroit Industry* frescoes (1932-3), painted on four walls of the Kresge Court. Unfortunately, Tracey was not able to meet with us for the follow-up interview. We meet outside of the DIA and decide to not plan our museum trajectory. Instead, we began the interview sitting on a hard, wooden, oblong bench, outside of the Egyptian section. I again use my iPad and iPhone to record our conversation. We begin talking about the Detroit uprising/riots of 1967 and I ask if these events had any influence on the Jitterbugs or their aesthetic. Johnny explains that even though he was very young, between seven and eight years old, he remembers that his parents kept him and his brothers in front of the house most of the time. Johnny also recalls "hearing all kinds of commotion and seeing military tanks from a distance." He continues, "and by the time it got really serious they [his parents] would snatch us into the house." Our conversation continues to touch on music-centric subjects, such as the iconic Detroit institutions of the *New Dance Show* and the Electrifying Mojo, and various other topics, all pertaining to Detroit's music and dance scenes throughout the decades.

From Egypt, we meander upstairs to the European Medieval and Renaissance section, settling on a plush red velvet and gold bench. I again set up my equipment for documenting the interview. After revisiting how influential the Jackson 5 was on the Jitterbugs and other various topics, I finally ask Johnny the starred question on my script. I say, "Based on a scene from Haleem's documentary, during a reflective moment on the history of the Jit, you say 'it was almost something to almost nothing.' I think this is such a beautiful and intriguing sentiment" and I ask if he remembers saying this. Johnny

instantly responds, “Yeah, when we were little kids, we didn’t have nothing.” He continues, “when they brought us Christmas presents, it was something. In-between Christmas and throughout the whole year, I can’t say that we were poor.” Johnny elaborates, “My stepmother was a social worker, my father worked at General Motors. Since there were so many of us in the house, man we would eat up everything in the house and there was nothing in the crib. So, in my later years...limousines, on the stage, on the verge of million-dollar deals, and—that’s something. That’s really what I meant, from almost nothing to almost something. We almost made it.”

Johnny continues to tell me about a female friend whose father happened to be record executive at Capitol Records in Los Angeles who signed Bill Withers and the S.O.S band. Johnny was seeking serious performance opportunities that combined his skills of dancing, song writing, and singing. She gave Johnny her father’s contact number and he proceeded to call him every day, for 364 days. Johnny explains, “every time I called, I had a secretary or a voicemail that said he was not available.” Johnny expresses that he was becoming very fatigued with the whole process. He continues, “Finally, on day 365 he answers the phone. I always have had the gift for gab and I am never at a loss for words, and—I choked. And I hung up the phone. So, again, that’s what I meant. From almost something to almost nothing.” I ask Johnny if he always has a “what if” lingering over him and he replies, “Yes.” I point out that his sentiment is also applicable to the Luke Skywalker situation in Miami but then we both laugh at the possibility that Luke would have stolen all their money anyways.

I then ask Johnny, “But what do you think is more important?” and he instantly responds, “speak on it, I like the way this is starting.” I continue to ask, “What do you think is more important, that you have this very much alive dance form that you are partially responsible for creating. In Detroit—you have this legacy, as opposed to the money and the fame.” He responds, “that’s a very a good question and that is probably the best question you have asked today.” Johnny continues, “It is having the legacy of this street dance. Because that *what if*—it’s just that. I don’t know what it would have been. But I do know what *this* is. This is standing up at the Charles H. Wright Museum for a ten-minute standing ovation and seeing girls now do something [Jitting] that we started and it’s so funny that it would last this long.”

This was the last formal question I asked Johnny during our interview and it felt organically correct and significant to end on this note, finishing the oral history journey in the same place it started. Also, the non-linear path that we chose to wander throughout the museum also stood as a metaphor for how our first interview played out. We meandered through different continents and eras, traversing from the African Arts section to American Modernism, without rhyme or reason. Through this process, I realized, as the “interviewer,” my job was to hold on to the reins, follow the thread, and unearth the kaleidoscopic jewels of wisdom Haleem, Johnny, and Tracey inserted into each story they shared with me.

By mapping the connections between these different stories, events, and histories, not through chronological thought processes, but rather through intuitive, circuitous rationale, I found the end in the beginning. Arriving at this paradox, I perceived there was

an important logic behind Johnny and Tracey recounting the history of the Jitterbugs randomly, outside of conventional concepts of linear time. This reasoning privileges lived-experience over chronology, which is ironically in opposition to the Jit privileging the corporeal replication of time and tempo of its respective musical counterpart. As such, while distilling an essence of key moments, ideas, and theories as depicted by two of the five founding members of the group, and a dedicated dancer from a later generation, the trajectory of this chapter mirrors the sequence, cadence, and flow of the history they presented to me. On this fragmented and roundabout journey with the McGhee brothers, we began standing at the back of Haleem's documentary screening inside the presumably sold-out auditorium of the Charles H Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit. Coming full circle, we end there, with a greater knowledge and appreciation of why that moment is important for not only Johnny and Tracey McGhee, but for the legacy of the Jit in Detroit.

CHAPTER V

THREE STRANDS OF THE (CONTEMPORARY JIT) BRAID: THE JITTERBUGS, THE ERROL FLYNNs, AND THE FUNKATEERS

On the dance floor, we gets belligerent
I mean ignorant, come get a little bit
If you can keep up, with this beat bruh
Cause if not, we'll tear you to pieces
Get your mother, get your father
Get your dog, get your cat, get your barber
Get the police, they can watch us
I don't care who you get, you can't stop us
WE R UNSTOPPABLE!

—QWNTYM “We R Unstoppable” (unreleased track)

The YouTube series titled the “Mr. No Edit Show,” created and hosted by Detroit dancer Ronald Ford (“Mr. No Edit”) presents various interviews he conducted with dancers, music producers, and DJs from Detroit, who are all prominent figures within the city’s small dance culture. The show covers topics ranging from the history of Jit to the current state of Detroit’s dance culture. The moniker “Mr. No Edit” refers to the online series’ minimalist aesthetic and its no-edit format in which all of the interviews are presented in their raw form. Ron himself is a prominent individual within Detroit’s dance community. His dance collective called the Unstoppables is the only group in Detroit currently keeping the dance called the Funkateer active, a funk style created in the early 1970s.

In episode 19, published on June 27, 2016, Ron interviewed the Detroit dance legend Fredrick Anderson, known as “Fast Freddy,” who gained local celebrity status due to his regular television presence on *The Scene*, Detroit’s own version of *Soul Train*, airing between 1975 and 1987 on channel WGPR-TV (Kiska 2017).²² After formally being introduced to the virtual viewing audience, Anderson says, “it’s an honor to be here, is what it is...because to know about your future you got to find out a little about your past. And if we can braid that together, it’s an unstoppable thing” (Mr. No Edit 2016). Anderson’s assertion that history matters and in order to understand the future it is very important to revisit the past is an apropos segue for explicating the conceptual framework of this chapter that weaves together the sometimes-sparse threads that connect the Jitterbugs to the contemporary style of Jit.

Continuing the non-linear approach to history established in the previous chapter on the Jitterbugs, this chapter provides a glimpse into some of the connections participants within the Jit community have made between the Jitterbugs and the contemporary Jit, notably, two specific Detroit-based dance genres: the dance style called the Funkateer created by the Funkateers from Inkster, Michigan and the arm/hand-centric dance form called the Flynn produced by Detroit’s most infamous street gang the Errol Flynn. Unlike the previous chapter that told the history of the Jitterbugs through nonlinear time, this chapter weaves a synchronic braid (to use Fredrick “Fast Freddy” Anderson’s word) that looks at the complex relationality between the Errol Flynn,

²² Mr. No. Edit Show. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=56Q_I1-IHe4&t=147s

Funkateers, and Jitterbugs, generally across the same period of time. A braid has three strands, and the middle strand is what gives it its shape. Without it, the shape becomes a twist. Each strand of a braid is distinct enough that even when woven together with other strands, it is still singular, unique, and obvious to the eye. This chapter braids together these three associated but separate dance histories, offering a model of how they collectively contribute to the contemporary Jit. Presenting data mined from interviews and multimedia sources, the information in this chapter bridges gaps in knowledge on the era between the original Jit and the contemporary Jit by looking to the past to make sense of the contemporary Jit. By examining the embodied mechanics of each dance style and their historical paths, it is possible to see how these three dance forms influenced the contemporary Jit, through specific movements that are still observable in Detroit's Jit culture today. Further, when looking at these individual groups and dances alongside one another, we can notice moments of continuity as well as rupture across bodies, time, and place. This chapter "braids" historical information to further contextualize the cultural productions that were influential upon the second phase of the Jit.

The Errol Flynnns: "A Street Gang That Indulged in Dance"

The Errol Flynnns were one of Detroit's most notorious street gangs. With membership in the thousands, they achieved infamy during the 1970s. Hailing from the Eastside of Detroit but claiming downtown as their turf, the gang was named after the actor Errol Flynn, an American Hollywood star who rose to fame during the Great Depression, most notably as Robin Hood. Flynn "captured the imagination of an America desperately in need of heroes; his erotic escapades diverted an increasingly cynical media

during the cold, long years of World War II; and his hedonistic, vagabond lifestyle became a blueprint for the counterculture of hipster poets who flourished after the bitter years of McCarthyism” (McNulty 2012, 3). Detroit’s Errol Flynnns were drawn to the actor’s ruffian yet sophisticated screen persona. The Errol Flynnns are best known for pulling off a mass robbery at the Average White Band concert at Detroit’s Cobo Hall in 1977, as well as engaging in hijacking, burglary, and monopolizing the entire heroin industry in Detroit (Ross 2013, 133).

In addition to being remembered for their crimes, the street gang Errol Flynnns left an indelible legacy on the arm and hand work of the contemporary style of Jit. In the *Encyclopedia of Street Crime*, author Jeffery Ian Ross states that the Errol Flynnns “introduced the world to ‘jitting’ (better known as hand signs to identify themselves)” (2013, 133). This statement, although vague, suggests a link between the dance the Jitterbugs were creating on the Westside of the city at the same time the Errol Flynnns were running much of Detroit’s organized crime in the 1970s. More specifically, as Jitting was being tailored for footwork, “Flynnning” was developing handwork, danced to the most popular funk tracks of the 1970s.

Growing up in the Metro-Detroit area, I was familiar with the Errol Flynnns and their reputation as street gang. However, I knew very little about how dance, more specifically the Jit, was a part of their legacy. Even though I was not born when they first emerged on the streets of Detroit, growing up I remember hearing the occasional story about their antics on the local news and through casual conversation; they were somewhat a local legend.

While searching online for any information on the Jit, I discovered a forum on Detroit culture, which is no longer online, with a discussion thread on Detroit's street gangs and how the Errol Flynns use to Jit at parties in the city. Because the details of how and why they danced were ambiguous, I wondered if the Errol Flynns were an organized crime syndicate that occasionally danced, or more of a street dance crew that sporadically engaged in illegal activity, or where they somewhere in the middle? During my interview with Haleem, I ask him to clarify the relationship between the Errol Flynns and dance; he explains, "They were a street gang that indulged in dance." This is similar to the early years of the Jitterbugs when they danced in the streets while looting stores. However, the Errol Flynns were not Jitting—they were Flynning.

The Errol Flynns are known for their signature hand movements that have information encoded into their aesthetics. Haleem clarifies, "they had this hand sign that was like their brand. That's the Flynn. They would crash house parties. They would let you know—you know they were the Errol Flynns when a bunch of guys start doing this." As he talks, Haleem demonstrates with both hands: with all four fingers touching, with straight fingers and a neutral thumb, functioning as one unit, his hands move from right to left, right to left, with a snake-like but funky quality, traveling upwards towards the ceiling, with his wrists and hands rotating inward and outward. Tristan Hackney describes the Errol Flynns' hand movement as: "moving their hands in and out, in the sky." Reggie "Munch" Turner explains that the Flynn, "was a language, they were

actually communicating.”²³ Through their hands, the Errol Flynnns claimed their turf and rank by inscribing their criminal persona into the city streets. According to Tristan, this trademark move “got adopted into Detroit dance and somewhat into Jitting as well.” That is, Flynnning was eventually incorporated into the contemporary Jit as “flagging.”

In addition to their signature handwork, the Errol Flynnns also had a specific style of dress, including ornate three-piece suits, Italian-made hats, wing-tip shoes, and long permed hair. According to Reggie, fashion was sometimes even incorporated into the dance: “They [would] throw [a] hanky up and spin it around and catch it and fall back and a guy would push him up.” He continues, “They had a lot of swag during that era. That’s attached to the Errol Flynnn and genres like that. But the Errol Flynnn was a little more ‘streetatized.’ It was street and it was Eastside, but they had a Cab Calloway type swag with it.” The Errol Flynnn inadvertently recruited a following and other dancers incorporated their swag by wearing ocean waves hairstyles and three piece stylish suits.

²³ The semiotic practice of corporeal writing with the feet and hands is commonplace within in hip hop culture. Applicable to the semiotic nature of the Flynnn, dance scholar Thomas DeFrantz describes corporeal orature as an alignment between dance and speech that describes “the ability of black social dance to incite action,” in which hip hop’s corporeal gestures have the ability to contextually cite beyond the dance itself (2004, 4). DeFrantz connects the communicative function of hip hop dance to J. L. Austin’s (1990) ideas on performative speech-act utterances, as they “contain meaning beyond the formal, aesthetic shapes and sequences of movement detailed by the body in motion” (ibid). Spoken utterances not only give facts and describe circumstances of affairs, but can also perform an action, or “do something,” denoted as a *performative utterance*, or just *performative*. To utter one of these sentences, in its appropriate context and circumstances, is not to state a fact, nor to describe what is being done. Rather, *saying* something actually *does* something.

This look was visible on episodes of *The Scene* dance show in the late 1970s, early 1980s.

Looking for the Flynn

Because only a few of my participants mentioned the Errol Flynn and/or had knowledge of the history, I searched for archival video of their signature style of dress and dance to understand the specifics of the hand movements and how the Flynn connected to the Jit. I also hoped to find footage of original members Flynnning, however, my search yielded few results. Haleem once again filled in gaps in my knowledge, telling me that Detroit native and television personality Judge Greg Mathis was one of the original members of the Errol Flynnns and explains, “For my documentary I wanted to include as many aspects as I could with Jitting. Since this was kind of exclusively focused on the Jitterbugs, I still wanted to tie some Errol Flynn in there too. And one way I wanted to do it was to get a fellow Errol Flynn person to narrate the whole film, and that person is Judge Greg Mathis, actually.”²⁴

The few videos available on YouTube display different danced variations of the Errol Flynn, such as basic instructional tutorials of only the handwork to more developed solo performances, incorporating some footwork. However, the most unexpected video I found was of famed Los Angeles Lakers basketball star Ervin “Magic” Johnson

²⁴ Mathis’ short-lived unlawful activity was public knowledge as he had written an autobiography in 2002 titled *Inner City Miracle*, detailing his affiliation with the gang and recreating the chaotic scene at the Average White Band concert.

performing the Errol Flynn on *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*.²⁵ During the interview Johnson describes his experience of dancing with Barack Obama at a White House event where Questlove, Jimmy Fallon’s musical director, spun records as the resident DJ. Johnson shows Fallon how he was “boogying down to the floor...real low” and then proceeds to stand upright and perform the Errol Flynn hand movement for Questlove with closed fingers, flat palms moving inward and outward, with a slight bounce of the upper body and shoulders. Johnson then says, “Hey Questlove, that’s the Errol Flynn—that’s back in my day” and Questlove responds with laughter, “I know the Errol Flynn! I know the Errol Flynn!” (*The Tonight Show* 2017). Even though Johnson is largely associated with Los Angeles, he was born in Lansing (the capital of Michigan) in the late 1950s, and his father worked for General Motors, which perhaps explains his familiarity with the Errol Flynn (Johnson and Novak 1993, 3). Although it is unclear how Johnson (and Questlove) was exposed to the Flynn, this example exemplifies a paradox of this braided history.

Another YouTube video titled “The_Errol_Flynn.mov,” offers very little contextual information, labeling it only as “70s dance.”²⁶ In the instructional dance tutorial of the Flynn, three dancers, two females and one male, spatially arranged in a reverse triangle formation with the male as the point display the handwork of the Errol

²⁵ Magic Johnson dancing the Errol Flynn on *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon*. February 13, 2017 <https://www.nbc.com/the-tonight-show/video/magic-johnson-on-working-with-obama-and-getting-the-lakers-back-on-top/3469731>

²⁶ Published by Michael Ivy on December 6, 2009. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zO5hRRr7JWQ>

Flynn while dancing to the song “Brick House” by the Commodores. All three dancers begin by only using their right arm and hand, sharply bent from the elbow, creating a perfect “L” shape. This version is not as funky as Haleem’s demonstration: they dance with a stiff flat hand, comparable to a stuffy “parade wave,” rotating their arm and hand inwards and outwards in sync with the funk beat, while slightly bouncing their upper bodies. At one point, the male dancer incorporates his left arm, mirroring the exact movement pattern of his right arm. As he moves both arms in the “L” shape outwards, both wrists rotate away from the centerline of the body to position the palms of the hands open towards the camera. Moving the arms back towards the body, crossed at the wrists to create an “X,” he rotates his wrists towards the body to position the palms of the hands facing him, no longer visible to the camera. Throughout the short video clip, the dancers hardly move their feet.

In sharp contrast to the previous example, in the video titled “The Errol Flynn,” a male dancer performs a freestyle solo of the Flynn to a song that also has that funky 1970s soul-sound with much more emphasis on footwork, floorwork, and embellishment of the signature hand movement.²⁷ As such, his arms are not only moving in and out, towards the sky, but laterally to the sides and down towards the ground, with his upper body hinged forward at the hips.

²⁷ Published by singhsun on April 25, 2007.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JxvzqbnT4Vk>

Various elements of his footwork are reminiscent of the Jitterbug's strike, jazz-it, and the walk, however, they are performed with more of a bounce-quality with his weight grounded lower to the floor, resembling the Jit shuffle that emerged in the 1980s.

On the video, it is difficult to make any definitive claims about who the dancer is and when this video was recorded because the viewer's comments did not offer much contextual information. However, a post by MARKUSVICTORIA succinctly captures the timeline and relationship between dance and street gangs in Detroit. The comment states, "OMG thats [sic] my uncle doing that dance. DAMMMM THAT WAS LOOOONG AGO lol. I remember when I was 4 on the porch watching them do that dance in the 80's. All the gangs back then was The Errol Flynn, BK's [Black Killers], Sconi's, L. K's and the 8 Mile Boys and the Smurfs. Oh and the Y.B.I. [Young Boys Incorporated]" (Singhsun 2007).²⁸ Unlike Johnson's performance and the dance tutorial, which focus on the handwork of the Flynn, this video displays not only how the handwork developed stylistically and spatially, but how footwork was integrated into the dance. As such, this solo is not the contemporary Jit, and not solely the handwork of the Flynn. Meaning, it appears that what we are seeing here is the plaiting of aspects of the Jitterbugs and the Errol Flynnns that later become characteristic of the contemporary Jit.

²⁸ This laundry list of Detroit's most notorious gangs reveals the entanglement of dance and criminal activity, beginning with the reign of the Errol Flynnns and culminating with the emergence of Y.B.I, who eventually overpowered the Errol Flynnns with their hold on the heroin, crack, and cocaine market in Detroit. After the Errol Flynnns were completely disbanded as an organized crime syndicate, their signature movement continued to flourish within Detroit's street dance culture.

My participant pool consisted mainly of Jitters who were born ten to twenty years after the Errol Flynns emerged, so they do not have direct knowledge of the processes through which Flynning was incorporated into the contemporary Jit. However, most give credit to the Mad Dancers (see chapter 6) for this integration. Getting more precise answers to how and why these two styles eventually fused is challenging because, according to Haleem, most of the original members of the Errol Flynns are deceased or incarcerated. Even with this lack of access, it is clear that over time the arm and hand work of Flynning was somehow merged into the contemporary Jit as flagging, though the origins and the significance of the term “flagging” are also not completely clear.

The Funkateer: Polyrhythmically Funk in a Figurative Box

The Funkateer, another Detroit dance phenomenon, was born shortly after the emergence of the Errol Flynns. The Funkateer is predicated on precision of group choreographic forms, polyrhythms, complex footwork, bodily isolations in the form of tensing and releasing, and at times legs that shake rapidly within a relatively tight square space. A hallmark of the Funkateer performance style is not only the exactitude of their unison, but the innovative, orderly formations they created with the group form.

The Funkateer emerged in Inkster, Michigan, a suburb located directly outside of Southwest Detroit. The Funkateer(s) is a noun and verb; the plural tense refers to the name of the all-male African American dance crew and the singular tense denotes a funk style of dance, pioneered by the Funkateers. The dance aesthetic the Funkateers created was different from other dance forms being created simultaneously in other parts of the country, or even Detroit, in the mid-to-late 1970s, similar to the singularity of Jitterbugs,

as discussed in the previous chapter. Unlike the Jitterbugs and the Errol Flynnns, the Funkateers were not an organized street gang, but rather a dance collective that performed at numerous venues and events in Detroit, gaining local celebrity status due to their many appearances on *The Scene*. Over the years, a number of dance collectives have specialized in the style. Over the past forty-plus years these different groups implemented their own unique stylizations and nuances into the dance style, however today, it is still recognizable as the Funkateer.

In stark contrast to the gangster zoot suit fashion aesthetic of the Errol Flynnns, the Funkateers generally wore matching button-down shirts, bowties, and slacks, although they sometimes wore glitzy costumes such as white satin genie pants with purple sequin belts. The Funkateers did not approach Funkateering as a street dance, but more so as choreographed entertainment through deft exactitude of the feet and rhythms, whereas the Errol Flynnns communicated “street cred” and demanded respect through their handwork.

Because my initial research design did not include interviewing former members of the Errol Flynnns or the Funkateers, searching for archival video was an attempt to get as close as possible to the original movements and originators of the form. Unlike my experience of searching for archival material on the Errol Flynnns, there are a few videos published online of the original Funkateers dancing. Most of this footage is of their appearances on *The Scene*, during the late 1970s and early 1980s.²⁹ One particular video is a short excerpt of Ed and Damone, two of the original members of the Funkateers,

²⁹ The Funkateers performing to “We are the Jonzun Crew,” by the Jonzun Crew on *The Scene* in Detroit, date unknown. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQwPkkWmyDM>

competing on the television show *Dance Fever*.³⁰ The description of the video reads:

Introducing the Funkateers from Detroit!!!. This Detroit dance group, like the Jitterbugs, left a lasting legacy inspiring a unique movement in the city that Detroiters still take part in. This clip shows the group on a national television dance show in the 80s – Dance Fever. S/O- [shout out] Keith Gailes for the footy [footage], Ron Ford, Reggie Munch, King Mustafa, Dennis Mills, Troy Shell, and the Unstoppables for still holding down the style of Funkateering!!! (Stringz313 2015)

For their performance, they wear identical costumes: hot pinkish-purple shiny lamé puffy genie pants with a matching vest and a white open-collared shirt, also with billowed sleeves. Around their waist is a white belt with two long wide tails hanging along the left side of their bodies, ending at the knee. As the poor video quality does not offer the finest detail, it appears they are wearing sparkling clean white lace-up shoes, with a very thin sole, reminiscent of jazz oxfords commonly used in the studio jazz dance world of the 1980s. As a final costuming touch, they wore white fingered gloves on both hands. Their costume choice mirrors the precise nature of the Funkateer: clean, sharp, and dynamic.

The duo dances to Prince and Shelia E.'s 1984 hit "The Glamorous Life," however it is the instrumental version that highlights Shelia E.'s proficiency playing various percussion instruments. The track allows the rhythmic complexities of the Funkateer movement to be punctuated. Within the minute and a half clip the duo perform

³⁰ While discussing the Funkateers with Haleem, he explains that he has footage posted online of Ed and Damone, two of the original Funkateers, dancing on the popular television dance competition show *Dance Fever*, hosted by Deney Terrio, which was in syndication from 1979-1987 (LoBrutto 2017, 20).

ticks of the chest and shoulders with their legs shaking rapidly, arm and hand movements that almost resemble the West coast style of popping and locking, and mechanical swift footwork of a robotic nature, all the while being in unison with each other and the beat of the music. As a whole, their movements are funky but cerebral. Their performance could be conceived as a corporeal cadenced deconstruction that physically demonstrates the rhythmic and melodic strata of Prince's score, a visual rendering of the dance's audio counterpart.

On this performance, Ed and Damone won second place in the competition, however this information is not discernable on the short video excerpt. I then asked others within the Jit community what happened to the Funkateers after winning *Dance Fever* and if they were still performing in Detroit. It seems the Funkateers have retired as a performance collective and little more is known about their origins than the trajectory of their dance career.

Although an entire chapter could be written on the Funkateer alone, I focus here on potential links to the contemporary Jit. Ron Ford, who is currently the seminal force behind keeping the Funkateer relevant in Detroit's dance culture, was a vital source of information for me on the Funkateer. Ron has been deeply enmeshed in the world of Funkateer since 1983 and has vast knowledge on the Funkateer family tree and the particulars of the dance form.

Ron explains that the Funkateer dance can be thought of as two equal parts, with fifty percent of the dance focused on upper body work and the other fifty percent concerned with lower body work. According to Ron, in Funkateering, "the torso, arms,

shoulders, and neck transition from tight isolations to loose, soulful movements, all done effortlessly. As the dance unfolds in time, the arms move in many creative ways, but they eventually end in a tensing of the muscles, whether in the arms, shoulders or hips.” In the lower body work, Ron explains, “the legs and feet are utilized in different shuffles, most notably a frontward stepping heel to rear toe/foot movement.” This particular shuffle is emblematic of the Funkateer, which differs from the shuffle in the Jit. Even Ron admits that the Funkateer shuffle occasionally gets associated with or confused for the Jit, saying it is even “sometimes called a Jit by later generations of dancers who have carried on ‘funking.’” What really makes the Funkateer different from either the Jit or Flynnning is when the two halves of the Funkateer come together. As Ron notes, “this continuous back and forth of upper and lower body movement mastery allows more focus on mirroring drum patterns which gives the dance style its funky visual. Because Funkateering is the visual creation of its audio counterpart, Funk music, whether instrument driven or electronically enhanced.”

The Funkateers’ devotion to reflecting what is occurring in the music results in sophisticated polyrhythmic isolations happening in different locations of the body, all occurring simultaneously, or as Reggie describes, “synchronizing in an orthodox style.” His statement evokes metaphorical imagery of the Funkateering body as a self-contained musical symphony. I ask, “If the Funkateering body was a musical composition, could the arms function as the strings and the legs as the percussion?” Reggie says, “Yeah, definitely, you could use all kinds of analogies, as far as an orchestra. It’s definitely a band with a human body because a lot of the movements that you do, they are in sync

with the instrumentation. It just occurs naturally.” When I ask, “Do you need a fine-tuned ear in order to properly Funkateer?” Reggie replies, “Slave to the rhythm. That’s what gives it the oomph. The impact. You know, you just dancing, I don’t care how well you dance. If you dancing all over the place, then the presentation is blurred. I don’t care how well you sing. If you not singing on note or hitting the right note at the right time, it would sound like a rhapsody,” which is irregular in form.

According to Reggie, being in accord with the beat of the music while the “arms, legs, and movements of the body are all on one accord,” is one of the most important features of the Funkateer. As a result, he explains the Funkateer is “definitely composed, it’s definitely not wild.” I suggest in response that the Funkateer seems very self-contained, as the objective seems less about traversing through space but exploring the many ways the body can polyrhythmically funk in a figurative box. Reggie responds, “yeah, definitely. But it’s not stiff.” I respond, “It seems to all radiate from the center of the body” and Reggie replies, “To a certain extent. It’s like, from the soul.”

Connections can be made here between the Funkateer, both the traditional and contemporary forms of Jit, and their proclivity for corporeally visualizing the music. For all three dance forms, the dancer’s musicality—how one perceives the music and responds appropriately and meticulously through dance—is just as important as accurately executing the steps.

The Funkateer Genealogy

The Funkateers created their dance style in the mid-to-late 1970s, shortly after the Jitterbugs and the Errol Flynnns entered Detroit’s dance culture. After the Funkateers

made their mark, other dance groups surfaced on the Funkateer scene, such as the Diabolicals, Magic, the Police from the Westside of Detroit, and the Time Dancers from River Rouge, which is considered “downriver” from the city of Detroit. The following partial genealogy details the dance groups that were significant to the legacy of the Funkateer and the specific ways they advanced the dance style.

Reggie was a young man in Detroit’s dance culture when the Funkateer was performed at many events throughout the city. He explains that the first Funkateer group he greatly admired was the Police (not to be confused with the late 1970s, early 1980s band), which he considers the second-generation of Funkateering. He says, “The first group that I really, really idolized, as far as Funkateering goes, it would be the Police. I was definitely a big fan of Dino/King Mustafa.” Reggie continues, “I think I was in the third grade when I first seen the Police. It was Dino/King Mustafa and Kip, there was another guy by the name of Tony (Plastic Man), rest in peace. And then there was another gentleman by the name of Geno.” He continues, “My inception of Funkateering, I believe it was from watching *The Scene*.” Reggie tells a story about going downtown Detroit with his mother, around the age of nine years old, and while she would shop the boutiques, she would let him meander through Hart Plaza. During his wanderings, he recognized many of the dancers who were Funkateering, as they were frequently showcased on episodes of *The Scene*. He says, “I would go over in the circle with them and be dancing. I’d be the littlest thing there, not that I’m big now (laughing). And it would be like—Mustafa and Plastic Man from the Police and I would just be over there dancing with them.” Captivated by the many ways Funkateering feet could travel, he

says, “I was just always fascinated with the way that their feet moved. That was the first thing that I learned, and I was nine years old. I learned that shuffle. Because it was very, very intricate and I used to just be awe struck like, wow, how can your feet just move like that? Then I just started seeing them and I just started doing it.”

Another second-generation Funkateer style came from the Time, (not to be confused with Morris Day’s funk/soul music group of the 1980s) who Reggie refers to as “phenomenal” and as “the Funkateer juniors.” Reggie continues, “They had a guy named Terry. I can recall seeing him when I was ten years old, seeing them perform at the [Michigan] State Fair. Terry was a showstopper.” Ron explains that at the same time the Police and the Time were performing in Detroit the other dance groups emerged, such as Magic and the Diabolicals (formally known as Zapp), who are responsible for inserting their signature pointed index finger into the Funkateer. These dance collectives gained local popularity and helped spread the Funkateer in Detroit through various performances and fierce competition.

Reggie explains that when Funkateering became a solidified dance phenomenon in Detroit in the early 1980s, “it took over like Beatlemania.” He recalls being in Hart Plaza and other venues in Detroit, witnessing numerous contests for individual dancers and groups who specialized in Funkateering. On the Eastside of Detroit in the early 1980s, the group Devo emerged (not to be confused with the alternative musical group of the 1970s and 1980s), and they are credited for advancing the movement quality of the Funkateer as their aesthetic was more fluid, with the insertion of more hand movements and full-body spins. Ron explains that Devo incorporated more complex movements of

the arms and inserted longer movement combinations into their choreographies. He clarifies, Devo “honed in on small traces of locking and popping they saw in the forefathers’ dance routines and multiplied them. The flow of their Funkateering was *more*,” however “yet less intense muscle contractions.” Comparing the aesthetic of Devo to the Funkateers, Ron explains, “When the Funkateers danced you could feel the floor move with their hard hitting, stop and go style. When Devo danced, you witnessed a plethora of intricate, yet smooth, non-stopping choreography that didn’t waste a single step. Devo called their style, Pop Locking, before this word became an umbrella term for Boogaloo and popping in Detroit.” Ron also explains the meaning behind the term Funkateer in this era. He says, “For the record, we didn’t call it Funkateering but Pop Locking, based off of Devo, an original Eastside group. Funkateering was mixing Jitting and pop locking together. So, we called it Detroit pop locking” (Insyncexposures 2016). Devo was responsible for inspiring numerous other dance groups that progressed their distinctive style.

In the early 1980s, two groups emerged directly from the Devo lineage: Cosmic Dancers (1982) and Cosmic Breakers (1983), in which the later expanded the conventional spatial confines of the Funkateer space. Ron explains that he was invited to join the Cosmic Dancers, founded by Derrick Billups, but instead joined the Cosmic Breakers, created by Kidea Richardson. The Cosmic Breakers were originally a breaking crew, who after formally disbanding, reunited under the same group title and re-emerged as a Funkateer group.

Ron explains that “similar to the path of the Cosmic Dancers, the Cosmic Breakers shadowed Devo’s aesthetic but added spatiality to the dance style by widening the distance between the feet and legs,” which claimed more space and expanded the possibilities of Funkateering space.

In tandem with several members of the Cosmic Breakers, in 1986 Ron created the Cosmic Crew, a Funkateer group responsible for progressing the tempo of the Funkateer by speeding up its corresponding music. Ron explains that changing the tempo of the music “pushed the envelope” within the Funkateer culture, setting the bar even higher. This connects to what was happening with the Jit in the mid-1980s as the footwork sped-up to match the techno tracks many Jitters were dancing to. Further, the Cosmic Crew progressed the Funkateer style by focusing of fluidity of movement and by inserting more combinations into the choreography.³¹

In 1988, with one member from the Cosmic Crew, Ron connected with another member from Cosmic Breakers and formed the group Main Attraction, who entered the male exotic dance club circuit on the Westside of Detroit, however the group disbanded within several months. Main Attraction specialized in the Funkateer and set the bar even higher by performing to music sped up to over 160 beats per minute. Ron explains that with Main Attraction he was able to teach more intricate movements, which were “too

³¹ Ron notes that he recruited Michael Gailes to be a member of the Cosmic Crew and taught Michael, as well as his brother Keith Gailes his dance technique, “who although was not a group member, proved to be an asset to the Funkateer style of dance.”

complicated for the Cosmic Crew to learn earlier.” Also, during this time Keith Gailes formed the hybridized dance crew Rare Appearance that specialized in Funkateering and Jitting, one the first and few groups who blended these styles.

In 2006, Ron created his final group, The Unstoppables, which is the last formalized collective of Funkateers who are still actively performing today. On the group’s creation, Ron says, “with the help of Michael Gailes, I formed the Unstoppables using all-but-one of the original members of the Cosmic Crew, along with Keith Gailes and never looked back.” The Unstoppables signature style of Funkateering evoked an experimental nature by inserting angular, unorthodox, and unpredictable arm and hand movements, which were not previously implemented in Cosmic Dancers/Breakers/Crew or Main Attraction choreographies.

Ron is passionate about not only disseminating knowledge of the Funkateer dance style but perusing creative projects to archive and preserve this important legacy of Detroit’s dance culture.³² Looking to the future, under his solo artist name QWNTYM (Quantum), Ron continues to advance the Funkateer through his work as a choreographer, performer, music producer, and playwright.

³² Ron is currently working on producing a documentary that “will enhance knowledge on all aspects of the Funkateers contribution to the body of dance named after them.” He is in the process of creating a Facebook page with more detailed information on the documentary. Facebook page title: *The Funkateers: The Dance, Group & Legacy*.

As QWNTYM, Ron is exploring the possibilities of the Funkateer by tweaking a twenty-year-plus idea of creating a new dance form with a Funkateer foundation he calls QWNTYM FNK (Quantum Funk).³³

As a last word on the genealogy of the Funkateer, Ron focuses on the originators and innovators of the dance form that he has dedicated most of his artistic career to. He says, “I am a product of my environment and the utmost respect is given to those before me, especially the originators: the Funkateers.” This partial genealogy details the close-knit nature of the Funkateer and that is only takes the devoted passion of a few to keep a forty-year-plus dance legacy alive and “funking.”

Tying up the Braid

This chapter has detailed the specifics of the Errol Flynn and the Funkateer, noting moments where they unite and split, while making connections to the contemporary Jit. As such, this rest of this chapter presents conversations I had with some of my participants where they verbally map their understanding of how these groups and dance forms relate.

Conversing with Reggie about the connections between the Jitterbugs, Errol Flynn, and Funkateers, he opines that even though all three are different they connect by being “on the same wavelength” and on the same “timeline of dance.” He clarifies: “it’s like, if you were to say family groups,” such as “the Jacksons, the Sylvers, the Osmonds, the Ramones, you know what I’m saying. It doesn’t mean that they all did the same thing but at the same time there may have been similarities because they are still by-products of

³³ For more information, video footage, and history visit <https://www.qwntym.com> and on YouTube under the channel name: QWNTYM.

each other, based upon them being from the same era.” Within this framework, I ask Reggie to explain the linkages between the Jit and the Funkateer and he succinctly responds, “The foot aspect.” He continues: “when the Jit first revisited us after the Jitterbug aspect, after the Errol Flynnns and all of that, it was straight up about a shuffle.” He explains, “If you ever looked at the Funkateer’s shuffle, there are a lot of similarities. They still had their own individualism, but there are similarities there.” Reggie considers Funkateering and Jitting cousins “primarily because of that shuffle aspect.” With the advent of the contemporary Jit, he says, “individuals started incorporating leg wraps, cross-overs, rolls on the floor, dives, foot/leg work, and everything. In other words, they embellished it, they gave it different ingredients and topics. So, that’s how they connect, because of the footwork aspect. That’s the commonality that they share.” To make matters more complicated, Reggie says that “some old school dancers define the Funkateer as a Jit style. In the later years, it became more specific. Oh, he’s Jitting, he’s Funkateering. You had to be from both eras to understand the why’s of a person saying what they are saying.” He continues, “I think anytime you moving your feet like that, some people just consider that as being the Jit.”

When I asked Johnny McGhee if he or any other members of the Jitterbugs personally knew any members of the Errol Flynnns or the Funkateers he says no. According to Johnny, their small gang of five couldn’t compare to or even attempt to communicate with the thousands of Errol Flynnns, and as such, they were not running in similar circles. Johnny clarifies that, “we saw the Funkateers more than we saw the Errol Flynnns when we would be at a [performance] venue or that kind of thing. We never knew

the Funkateers personally by name and the Errol Flynnns were Eastside and we were Westside.” I was surprised by this response because the Jitterbugs and the Funkateers were extremely popular performance acts in Detroit and as Johnny mentioned, had shared performance spaces, roughly during the same time period. Even though all three groups lived in relatively close proximity to each other, it is apparent that they co-existed independently of each other. However, as this chapter has shown, though they have their distinct identities, Flynnning and Funkateering were thought of as Jitting by many in the city, and eventually became incorporated into the contemporary Jit.

It is important to note Johnny’s delineation of Eastside versus Westside, which implicitly references the segregated nature of Detroit. This mindset, based on what side of the city one is from, is significant to the history of the contemporary Jit, which is discussed in detail in the next chapter. However, it is important to note here that even though a few of my participants said that the Eastside/Westside issue did not really begin until the 1980s and early 1990s, Johnny’s statement seems to suggest otherwise. This geographic separation of the Jitterbugs from the Errol Flynnns has the potential to strain the braid that makes up the contemporary Jit, but it does not unravel it. They may exist separately, but together they still feed into the Jit.

To tie up textual braid by segueing into the next chapter on the contemporary Jit: even though specific movements of the Jitterbugs, Errol Flynnns, and Funkateer are still perceptible while observing a dancer perform the Jit today, each still stands alone as a unique dance phenomenon. Within each distinct strand, the complex stories of the Jitterbugs, Errol Flynnns, and Funkateers are embedded in the dance. Viewing these

strands intertwined, even with the complexity of simultaneously containing breaches and continuities, the braid forms a new whole: a system of knowledge, history, bodily techniques, and aesthetics essential to the development of the contemporary style of Jit.

CHAPTER VI

THE CONTEMPORARY JIT: SHUFFLING THROUGH THE WAVES

Let me see yo' footwork, let me see yo' Jit.
—DJ Marquis “Let Me See Yo’ Footwork” (1993)

The previous chapter presented the braided history of the elements of the contemporary Jit, demonstrating that the pathway from the Jitterbugs to the contemporary Jit is not linear, but rather an intertwining of contemporaneous local forms. Since most Jitters within the community did not know about the Jitterbugs and the origins of the Jit until Haleem’s documentary, it makes sense that there are disconnects and disagreements on the history, influences, and techniques that connect the original and contemporary styles of Jit. Some feel that what the Jitterbugs created was their own thing, the traditional style of Jit, and that the contemporary Jit is not a progression of their dance form but something totally distinct and different. Some posit that the Jit was *really* born in the 1980s-1990s, pioneered by the Mad Dancers crew. Still others argue that the advent of the shuffle is what made the Jit different from the Jitterbugs, that this is what made the Jit become the Jit.

I asked Johnny McGhee how he responds to the contention that there is little connection between the traditional and contemporary styles. He replies, “Of course there is a connection. If you are saying Jit—it absolutely has to reflect the original, unless you are trying to say you made it up?” As discussed in Chapter Four, when the Jitterbugs

were dancing in Detroit in the 1970s the term Jit became synonymous with their style dance, which Johnny believes indicates the link between these two styles. He says, “It’s a direct evolution, no doubt. How can it be separate and you still talking Jit? Now, call it something else and then you got a separation.” Most dancers in the Jit community I talked to seem to agree on crediting the Jitterbugs as the forefathers of the traditional style of Jit and the Mad Dancers as pioneering the contemporary style of Jit. In other words, the Mad Dancers are the crew that took the braid and produced the contemporary Jit out of it.

Whereas the previous chapter focused on the Jitterbugs, Errol Flynnns, and the Funkateers, this chapter moves through almost four decades, detailing a small sampling of dance crews and individual dancers belonging to the second and third waves of the contemporary Jit, adding a fourth (virtual) wave shaped by online communities.

On the generational demographic of Jitters in the community, some participants explain there are three waves or generations of Jitters in Detroit, although the perimeters were not always clearly delineated in each interview. Roughly the first wave consists of the Jitterbugs, Errol Flynnns, and Funkateers, beginning in the 1970s; the second wave is shaped the advent of the contemporary style of Jit and notable dance crews who advanced the style in 1980-2000: The Mad Dancers, Dream Team, Four Babies, the Unstoppables and the X-Menn; and the third wave consists of Jitters who incorporated other dance styles and forms into the Jit (house dance and breaking), such as Haleem Rasul, Mike Manson, Queen Gabby, Jittin’ Jesus and many others in the 2000s. And the fourth virtual wave is shaped by online Jit communities, from the early 2010s to the present day.

Beginning with the Mad Dancers, I present a partial lineage of the contemporary Jit, interwoven with various debates that shape the Jit culture and detailed descriptions of the fundamentals of contemporary Jit dance movement vocabulary. One of the main issues traced in this chapter is how dancers in the more recent waves of the Jit have incorporated other street dance forms, such as breakdancing or Chicago house dance. To contextualize this development, I demonstrate the various ways technology and social media have affected the philosophy, culture, and dance technique of the Jit, including ruptures between ideas on the physical and the virtual, the underground and the mainstream, and originality and reinvention. Further, I also explain how the Internet and social media changed the way members of the Jit community not only communicate but (virtually) learn and study the craft.

The Second Wave: The Mad Dancers and the Contemporary Jit

The Mad Dancers formed around 1979 and continued dancing as a strong force in the Jit culture into the mid-1990s. Most of the original members attended Detroit's Northeastern High School, which officially closed in the 1980s. On the name Mad Dancers, founding member Chuck Farmer explains that his cousin "Nard," also one of the original members, was a fan of *MAD Magazine* and was infatuated with the publication's resident mascot, Alfred E. Neuman, "the little man with the freckles," who was frequently highlighted on the cover of the publication (Insyncexposures 2016). The Mad Dancers even created a logo with Neuman's face emblazoned on T-shirts to promote themselves while dancing at various public events and parties, in the early 1980s.

On the *Jitt & Techno/House Community Elite* Facebook page, Floyd Mosley, one of the creators and original members of the Mad Dancers, offers this condensed history on the genealogy of the Mad Dancers:³⁴

A DJ named Terry Jones aka (Doc Mad) use to call us his Mad Dancers because we would show up everywhere [where] he would be DJing at...The symbol on his speakers was Alfred from *Mad Magazine* and on his turntables, that later became our symbol representing Mad. Later he ended up committing suicide from depression. So, we went downtown and had the name registered. We started doing talent shows. It was me, OC, Frank, Nard, [and] Doug that was mostly the front men cause it was quite a few of us. Then about a year or so later we brought in Tony Searcy for all who didn't know. Coz is from the very first group of Mad right alongside of me. When we started slowing down dancing about 1989 Coz asked us could he start up a second wave of Mad to keep our name alive we said yes that would be great, so he did. When they started slowing down that's when he recruited Bisco Joe Hill, Charles Ebon Rooks aka Doc Moc, Jamaine, T-Majors, Freaky Will...etc. and they were the 3rd wave of Mad the ones you guys know so well...Then Disco Greg formed Mad Sounds that consisted of Jesse The Body, DjLeon Purse, Tooshay, Dondi aka DJ Braid and Calvin Adkins We was one big happy family, best friends...but its sooo much more to our story. #HistoryLesson. (The Jitt & Techno/House Community Elite 2018)

This genealogy shows that within the history of the Mad Dancers there were three waves or generations of members. “Bisco” Joe Hill, from the third generation of the Mad Dancers started Jitting in high school in 1988 with Reggie “Munch” Turner and others, but after joining the Mad Dancers his dance acumen escalated to a higher level. He credits the previous members of the Mad Dancers—Terrence Majors, Cosmo, Pops, Doc Moc, and Benny Hill—for his technical development saying, “when I started bugging beside them, that’s when it really got exciting” (Insyncexposures 2016). Hill, together with other third wave members of the Mad Dancers, such as Freestyle Mane, Freaky

³⁴ Some dance communities and/or individual dancers use two “T’s” to spell Jitt.

Will, and Little Henry, took the Jit to another level by “mixing it on up,” which kept the dance relevant in Detroit, well into the mid-1990s.

(Still) Dancing Mad and Jitting Fundamentals

Most Jitters within the current culture agree that the present-day Jit closely resembles the Mad Dancers style. Haleem explains that the Jit of today looks similar to the Mad Dancer aesthetic as “they were that group to standardize the dance to what it looks like now. With the new music sped up, to techno, this is how it evolved through them. They set a precedent and people followed after them.” The group’s contemporary style of Jit is a corporeal language communicated through footwork, armwork/handwork, floorwork, and power moves, with footwork inspired by the traditional Jit and the Funkateer shuffle, and arm and handwork from the Errol Flynn. The following sections detail the elements of the Mad Dancer’s contemporary style of Jit, such as “girl dance” and the bisco, as well as other foundational dance vocabulary that continues to shape the contemporary Jit today.

Mosley explains that the dance group TNT, who made regular television appearances on *The Scene*, was highly influential upon their style of Jit and they “idolized” TNT’s style and “tried to do their every move” (The Jitt & Techno/House Community Elite 2018). TNT is known for pioneering “girl dance,” or “girl dancing,” a style performed with shimmies of the shoulders and the chest; snake-like movements of the upper body and hips; and impressive leg kicks, requiring nimble flexibility and bodily control. Reggie describes “girl dance” as, “very flexible, rhythmic, and energetic, with a lot of twisted, coordinated movement, all in sync with the beat.” Asking Reggie why it is

called girl dancing, he states, “well, it is definitely feminine, and I think this is why we call it that.” As such, he explains, “It’s not really a male stereotypical dance. Males do it, but you would call it a girl dance. Men just don’t move like that unless he just knows how to move like that.” I reply, “I think it’s fascinating that the Jit is hyper-masculine and then there is this one aspect called girl dancing. It’s okay to not be hyper-masculine—for a minute.” Reggie replies:

Right. Well, see the thing about it, back in the day, even if you Jitted or you Funkateered, you were a dancer. You still did all different styles of dancing and that’s just an aspect of it. It has minimized, tremendously now, but that’s an aspect of it. Back in the day if a person was “girl dancing,” he might throw some Funkateer in there. He was versatile. Back in the day you had to be versatile. You just couldn’t be limited to a Jit. That’s why the competition was so fierce because you had to dance. *The Scene* really influenced a lot of my versatility, as well. I might like the way she “girl dance,” but I might like the way he water wave, I might like the way he Funkateer, I might like the way he just look cool. So, after admiring all of them, I basically became like a gumbo.

In this context, “girl dance” merged into the Mad Dancer’s style of Jit, notably through the ingenuity of Terrance Majors.

Majors joined the Mad Dancers in the late 1980s. “Bisco” Joe Hill, describes Terrance Majors as “a monster” because “he did certain things like no other” (Insyncexposures 2016). He explains, Majors “brought out stuff that was disco-ish. He brought his own little flair to the game. The way he could breakdown and spin up. Put the girl dance in there, he had style like no other” (Insyncexposures 2016). Terrance Majors is deceased, however, his spirit lives on through the Jit community, as many dancers contend he is one of the most talented and inventive dancers of the Jit legacy.

Mike Manson explains that dancers specialized in not only girl dance but also the bisco, originally called the rambsico but over time was abbreviated to just bisco. He explains, “Back in the day when people were doing the bisco, there were people that just specialized in the bisco. There were people that just specialized in girl dance. There were people that just specialized in Jit.” However, over time, “all of these elements came together.” In today’s iterations of the Jit, girl dance and the bisco are fundamentals of the form and are frequently incorporated into one’s freestyle.

The bisco belongs to the category of armwork, even though the feet and arms move in seamless harmony. Michael Smith describes a basic bisco, as “when you take your feet in and out and it has a little bounce.” While biscoing, the feet move in opposite directions of each other by pivoting inward and outward, while keeping the weight forward on the balls of the feet. The arms are bent sharply outwards from the elbow, usually performed with balled fists, while the arms mimic the footwork that can travel to either side of the body or remain stationary in place. As the feet and arms move in tandem, a slight recoil of upper body usually punctuates the driving rhythm of the music.

“Bisco” Joe Hill is credited for elevating the movement and bringing it into the Mad Dancers’ repertoire. Hill notes that other dancers before him, such as Doc Moc, specialized in the bisco, but that he developed the bisco by bringing “that extra power with it” (Insyncexposures 2016). Freaky Will, also a member of the Mad Dancers, is credited with coming up with the nickname Bisco Joe (Insyncexposures 2016). Freaky Will is deceased but is largely considered a Jit legend by many in the culture.

Many Jitters feel that without knowing the fundamentals of Jit, including footwork such as basic shuffles and the kick-wiggle-back, various forms of armwork like flagging, and floorwork, one is not really Jitting but degrading the form by trying to perform a few moves. The following sections detail these elements that since the Mad Dancers have become essential for the contemporary Jit, and how they all come together in form.

Footwork: “That Mad Shuffle”

Farmer explains that the “Mad style” was different from what most of the Jit culture was dancing in early 1980s, due to their precise technique, creativity, and the visible public presence they had in Detroit. By 1984-85, most of the original Mad Dancers had graduated from high school and their style became a dance phenomenon in the city. Farmer says, “Everybody was Jitting and doing their little stuff, but Mad, when we danced, we were more about entertaining the girl that was in front of us. So, we would be bugging [Jitting] and dancing with her, without interfering with the floor around us and letting the people watch” (Insyncexposures 2016). On the Mad Dancers’ significance and exclusive style, grounded by the “Mad shuffle,” Farmer states, “you could tell a Mad Dancer a lot by that shuffle,” and “we invented this, this a Detroit thing” (Insyncexposures 2016).

The fundamentals of contemporary Jit footwork are predicated on the numerous variations of shuffles Jitters can perform. Shuffle is an umbrella term, as most variations do not have specific names. Any standard shuffle will contain a kick or kicks in several directions, pivots of the feet turning inwards and outwards, distinct rhythmic patterns of

the feet, and frequent changes of weight between both feet. What makes shuffles challenging to perform and engaging to watch is the nature of the footwork's directionality. As an example, shuffles can be performed symmetrically: the directional foot pattern the dancer executes with the right foot is replicated with the left foot, or the Jitter can implement an asymmetrical pattern, making the movement unpredictable and more complex.³⁵

Kenya emphasizes the importance of shuffles to the Jit. Without knowing the basic foundational steps of the Jit, she says, "you have nothing. So, within the foundation you have your basic shuffles. Your shuffles are what is used to transition from moves, to work your way around the circle, just learning how to use your atmosphere. Whatever you do on your right, you gotta do on your left. Whatever you do on you left, you gotta do on your right." Shuffling on the dance floor is not about just kicking your feet in different directions. Through the shuffle, the dancer imparts a certain type of feeling or style, an oxymoronic mix of smooth and rugged, while effortlessly moving through the space.

³⁵ Kenya compares the Jit to tap dance, stating, "When it comes to putting the movement to the music and the sound, I would say Jit is like tap dance because sometimes when you are Jitting you are actually making the beat, itself, even without the music." Haleem also compares Jit to tap: "the Jit is unique, and I identify it with fast footworking—street tap if you will." Even though there are some similarities between the Jit and tap dance, the Jit shuffle should not be confused with the tap shuffle. Both begin with a basic foot pattern that can be developed and embellished in an infinite number of ways. However, a tap shuffle generally requires the dancer to place the majority of their weight on the balls of their feet in order to insert quick punctuations of sounds, generated from the heel. With a Jit shuffle, the weight can change from the balls of the feet to heels, depending of the combination of movements and the directionality of footwork. Because the Jit is heel-driven, it can look and feel more grounded than tap dance.

The directionality of footwork can be performed by staying in one place (“in the pocket”), or traverse in any direction within the space. Kenya explains, “Sometimes you see Jitters that are just in the pocket. What I mean by in the pocket, they are just staying there and they just footwork. They just show you the footwork instead of, forget all the stunts right now, let me just show you the combos,” which is also referred to by current dancers as coasting. Kenya continues, in Jitting, “Some people like to coast, and when I mean coast it means just in it. Some people like to be like, I’m about to show you all my moves right now.” But with coasting, Kenya finishes, “I’m just showing you my footwork, I’m showing you that I don’t suck at all, I’m showing you that I got this work. Don’t be fooled.” Michael Smith explains that styles of coasting connect to one’s musicality, detailing “if the music is fast, your shuffles are coming in a little bit harder.”

One particular movement, the kick-wiggle-back, is a footwork staple in any Jitter’s repertoire. Michael Smith describes the kick wiggle back as “just a kick, you wiggle your leg and you go back into what is called a clinch where your leg moves back behind your other leg.” Mike Manson describes the mechanics of the kick-wiggle-back in the following way

Kick-turnout-back. Kick-turnout-back. Kick-wiggle-back. Left leg stays planted; you are on the ball of your foot on the left leg. Kick straight out right the right, when you go back, to the side, you turn out, when you go all the way back, kick-wiggle, the wiggle is going to be the turn out, the back is going to be when your leg goes behind your left foot. You kick, bring the foot back in, turn it at an angle, put the right foot behind the left leg, move your left leg like the Charleston, just a little tiny bit, and then place it back there. So, kick-wiggle-back, 1-2-3. It’s a motion. It should look as simple as walking because It shouldn’t be that complicated, as far as if we take out the concept that we have to do moves. You don’t have to do moves when Jitting. It’s all about the feeling, it’s all about the groove.

Regardless if Jitter is coasting or aggressively dancing with hard-hitting footwork, shuffling feet can efficiently slide, skim, glide, flick, brush, pivot, swivel, twist, rock, kick, tap, wiggle, roll, dig, crossover, spin, pop; all the while the arms are fluently in sync and mimicking the movements of the feet. The seamless connection between the arms and feet being in harmonious sync with each other are one of the most important technical aspects of the Jit.

Arm and Handwork: “Flowing Like the Detroit River”

The contemporary Jit’s arm and handwork are generally referred to as flagging, inspired by the Errol Flynn’s practice of sending out semiotic codes detailing gang affiliation via Flynnning. Flagging, a prominent element of contemporary Jit is purely aesthetic and does not convey gang affiliation or messages. On the mechanics of flagging, Michael Smith describes flagging as a “kind of a flowy motion of throwing your arms out and crossing them, being able to move around freely to the music. Depending on how the music is, you are just really associating yourself and listening to the music and moving to it.” Flagging is a style of spherical armwork that is at once fluid but also connected rhythmically to what’s occurring with the music. When flagging, the trajectory of motion rarely halts, and the circuitous movements are almost never staccato or sharp. Flagging can be performed with open hands or balled fists and often dancers will use their pointer finger to trace roundabout pathways in the air. While flagging, dancers will either completely stop moving their feet or implement footwork that complements or mirrors the flagging of the arms.

Despite the fact that flagging has been disconnected from gang practices, the criminal activity attached to the Jitterbugs' early years and the reign of the Errol Flynn's in Detroit has nonetheless left an indelible mark on the contemporary Jit, a legacy that Detroit's dance culture still contends with. Gabby Smith explains that the Jit "was created in the harsh and crime-ridden streets of Detroit, Michigan, and I have to say it like that because you really want people to understand where it came from. It was a dance form that was born out of crime, but also as an outlet for criminals to not do terrible things. Jit is a dance that was born to elevate criminal activity, as a place of recreational solitude." She continues, because the Jit was created in the streets, "it was created from a hard place. It wasn't created out of a place of love." Connecting the movement dynamics of the Jit to crime in the streets, Gabby says, "the fluidity of the movement, it can either be staccato or it can be a smooth ride. Jit can either flow like butter or like the Detroit River, or it can hit hard like a shootout on Seven Mile [Road]." Eric Broadnax also connects the Jit to its criminal past: "the Jit is a bunch of gangster movements turned into a dance. It's the streets. It's the streets turned into movement. We're like the Nicholas Brothers, like Fred Astaire, like people of that nature. It's flashy. It's Detroit. It's just us showing our personality." James Broxton Jr. explains that the Jit is a "feeling," and it is "rough," where the movements are the embodiment of the streets.

Floorwork: "Floor Jitting"

Beyond girl dance, the bisco, footwork, and flagging, the Mad Dancers' style of Jit also pioneered the element of floorwork, also called groundwork in Jit. Floorwork movements place the dancer on the ground, almost supine, reclining slightly backwards

on their hands and buttocks on the floor while continuing to dance with his/her feet. The dancer drops to the ground and finishes by sitting or lying flat on his/her back. A common movement that many Jitters implement into their freestyle form begins from this seated position and then the dancer improvises a stylized section of footwork in the air. Michael Smith describes this as “Jitting on the ground” because “it’s the same moves you would essentially do standing up, you transfer that as if you were laying down or sitting on the floor.” This is a signature movement where the feet virtually inscribe the dancer’s own unique stylization into the air. By literally removing their feet from the floor, the dancer raises the stakes of how fast, and in what manner, the feet can move when gravity is not an issue.

Another foundational element of Jit’s floorwork is drops, influenced by the Jitterbugs and other forms of dance, where the dancer breaks from performing foot or armwork by descending to the floor in different ways. Frequently Jitters will drop to the floor and instead of rebounding straight back up to a standing position they kick both legs straight forward into the air, quickly bring both feet back in to the bottom of the drop position, and then rise to stand. Generally, the drop is often used as a transitional step to move from footwork or armwork into floorwork and is also implemented as self-contained movements that drop quickly to floor to rise back up in inventive, unexpected ways.

Jitting Form

A Jitter’s form is vitally important, predicated on clean lines and angles between the arms and feet, as well as asymmetrical shapes created simultaneously by both arms.

As an example, one particular shape that has come to represent the Jit as a visual icon is the left arm is bent sharply inwards with the left hand balled in a fist placed in front of the armpit with the left elbow reaching towards the ceiling. The right arm is straight, with the right fist balled, reaching downwards at a 30-degree angle. The most important element of this shape is the continuation of line that begins from the tip of the right elbow, traveling across the front of the torso and continuing to radiate down the right arm. The proper form of this shape dictates one continuous straight line from the tips of the right fingers to end of the left elbow. In this the shape the legs also have a distinct form, which are in direction opposition to the form of the arms, giving the figure balance and harmony. The right leg, slightly turned out from the hip, is placed in front of the left leg, with a slightly bent knee. The back-left leg is also slightly turned out, but the leg is straight with the left heel driving firmly into the ground. Sometimes dancers perform variations of this shape, with both arms bent, similar to the look of “chicken wings.” This static shape is the end result of the movement called the clinch, however, some Jitters from older generations refer to it as the crossover, revealing that over time terminology has slightly changed.

Styles of Jit: Eastside “Grit” versus Westside “Flash”

The Mad Dancers set a precedent of skilled, innovative dance technique, raising the stakes of the Jit game. However, according to some of my participants, even though the Jit world was highly competitive in the 1980-90s, at that time it was not yet divided by the Eastside/Westside rivalry that permeates the Jit culture today. Due to the territorial nature of street dance in Detroit, Jitters from the Eastside have historically danced

differently than dancers on the Westside of the city. Eastside Jitters are known to be technique “purists,” whereas Westside Jitters are known to be “flashier” by inserting athletic tricks and stunts into their technique.

On the Eastside/Westside conflict, Reggie explains that in the 1980s, “the Jit wasn’t about East versus West and it was not as segregated as it is now. It was about the dancing, as a whole.” He explains that during the mid to late 1990s, the highest peak of Jit’s popularity, “that’s when the Jit started to become more segregated” and “with the segregation, people wanted to introduce their way of Jitting, in addition to the original way. They wanted to add more flavor.” Even though most Jitters subscribe to the Westside/Eastside rivalry doctrine, some find it problematic because it has cemented a hierarchy, essentially positioning the technique of the Eastside as superior to the Westside.

The Westside being labeled as entertaining and ostentatious can be traced back to the Jitterbugs, as their style employed an equal mix of skilled footwork and incredible acrobatics. Conversely, the contemporary Jit of the Eastside Mad Dancers is predicated on clean execution of technique and form, most notably of footwork in the guise of the shuffle, with less attention to tricks. Gabby Smith expands upon the connections between the Jitterbugs and the Mad Dancers, detailing that the social climate of the United States, in their respective eras, had an influence on shaping these different styles. She explains:

You know what is so interesting, the Jitterbugs, that was more of a fun style of Jit. The Mad Dancers, they were popular in the 90s, think about the music that was surrounding that era. There was a lot of Public Enemy and NWA. This is when hip hop was hard-hitting. There was so much stuff going on and we didn’t have a voice. At that time, we needed a voice, we needed an outlet, we needed people to

hear us. Where, in the 70s, everything was starting to dwindle, and we needed something, but we had already faced the 67' riots [in Detroit.] So, I think we were kind of done at this point, we were just tired. And we just needed something to make us laugh. Something to give us entertainment. And, although this style of dance was born from the street, I don't necessarily think it was the street style that made me look the other way—I was more entertained. In the 90s, I feel like I wanna fight somebody, if I went to a Jit battle, I would probably want to fight somebody after that. And now, today, I kind of feel like it's a little bit of both. Just depending what side you are on.

Gabby's statement further instantiates the idea of the Westside aesthetic (Jitterbugs) as entertainment and the Eastside aesthetic (Mad Dancers) as raw and competitive.

When I asked questions on *why* the Westside aesthetic was flashier than the purist Eastside style, some attributed this difference to the Jit being incorporated into the exotic male club scene. Westside clubs for female patrons, like Watts, Henry's, and Mozambique began to feature Jitters. Jit's connection to the male exotic dance club circuit has a complex history. What is significant from that history is that as a result the Westside Jit had to be less technical and more entertaining, accessible, and exciting for the females who frequented these various exotic clubs.

Within the Jit community, there are other theories and opinions on the Eastside/Westside dichotomy, Michael Smith explains:

My style is Eastside, because that is how I learned. It started Eastside, it's an Eastside dance. When you look at it pound for pound, move for move, the Eastside is the basis for the form and structure and that's where it is. When you look at the style on the Westside, it's more showy, more entertaining to maybe a broader audience, which that is where I think a lot of the clash is because I'm a dancer and I like to entertain, too. I think the Eastside looks better because it is technical. People that are technically minded see that. And when they see people doing all this flipping and jumping and all that swirling stuff—the way that they entertain on the Westside, they look at it a certain way. They don't consider it really Jit.

John Nance, a member of the Eastside X-Menn crew describes the Eastside/Westside clash as “very whack” and “very stupid” because “it’s like working backwards.” He continues, “The whole point of us doing this [Jitting] is because we wanted to do something with the craft, we wanted it to flourish, we wanted it to grow. But, instead, it’s actually distracting” from the cause. For John, the Eastside/Westside issue “goes even deeper because it’s not just East versus West.” Within each geographic location, dancers belonging to the same “side” also have conflicts with each other. He explains that in the current Jit culture this issue is “not a big epidemic,” explaining, “it’s not like we’re on the Eastside and we are gonna stay away from these Westsiders! No, because there are people on the Westside that I deal with, that I would make dance routines with.” He notes various Westside Jitters he has collaborated with, such as dancer Larry Moore, from the Westside Four Babies crew.

Willie “Sonic” Hull, who grew up on Detroit’s Westside believes that the “Eastside/Westside thing is the worst thing that happened” in the Jit culture and compares the ramifications of this geographical conflict to “long-standing arguments and battles on religion.” On the two techniques, He explains, “The Westside style of Jit is more of the power moves and the entertainment portion. You may get flips and different stunts. The Eastside has showmanship as well but it's everything in its proper form. So, you got this clash here and it gets competitive and everybody has a different opinion.” Asking Willie to describe power moves, he explains, “Power moves are crowd pleasers. I guess you could say the “ohhhhs” and the “ahhhhs,” something to show people that look, I gotta little oomph, I’m not just light.” On the mechanics of power moves, he says:

your power comes from when you use your toe and your heels. Majority of the time you use your heels to break, to stop in one position and you use your toes to do what we call “get mobile” and that's just like moving around, trying not to stay in one spot. So, the power is literally when you take a combo, which is from a three to go into an eight set of moves. When you feel like that power move should come, you stop, after that charged move. For instance, think of it like, if you went kick, kick, kick, kick, in the count of four, you can make a simple power move and just say kick, kick, kick, and BAM!

Willie explains that power moves exist for when one is ready to “turn it up” and notes that the bisco is an “automatic power move,” as some Jitters use it to “get wind,” whereas others use it to “charge up.”

Tristan, who describes his style as “old school Eastside” explains that the Eastside has “more finesse” with more emphasis on performing clean foot shuffles. He clarifies, with the Eastside aesthetic “it’s a lot more jazz type dance. It’s like a smooth groove when you dancing,” whereas the “Westside is like more power, more aggression when they do moves.” He uses the bisco as to detail how the same movement looks different, depending on one’s style: the “Eastside bisco would be smooth” whereas the Westside bisco would be performed very aggressively.

Rising from the Underground: The Jit Phenomena

By the mid-1990s, the Mad Dancers,’ and numerous other dance crews, helped the Jit become a full-fledged dance phenomenon in the city of Detroit as Jitters from the Eastside and the Westside were shuffling from the parking lot to the club, from the club to the afterhours party, from the afterhours back to the parking lot. During this time, Jit was so prevalent that spontaneous Jit cyphers would often break out in parking lots all over the city. Mike Manson says, “I promise you, you can walk up to any black adult in

Detroit and they will tell you a story about Jit, that's how big it was in our community."

On the dance phenomena, Haleem explains that because Jitting had a visible presence in all corners of the city during the 1990s, Jit music also became a local Detroit singularity.

By the mid-1990s, Jit had appropriated ghettotech as its new musical counterpart. Techno music remained a persistent feature of the city's underground dance music scene, however a new genre of music called ghettotech, also referred to as bootytech, combined techno with elements from Chicago house, Miami bass, and hip hop. The origin of the title ghettotech is not entirely clear and some DJs who produce and spin this genre even disagree about the name. Detroit DJ and producer Gary Chandler states:

people have given it the label of ghettotech, but we have always called it tech on the streets. Ghettotech, I don't know who made the term up, because a lot of the music that is being played is not ghetto music. You have to live in the ghetto to understand ghetto music anyway. You know whoever gave the term ghettotech to the music never grew up in parts of Detroit that you would call the ghetto. (Ewy Ghettotech 2012)

Despite the contested nature of term, ghettotech became synonymous with Detroit Jit and dancers and DJs still used the term. As a genre, ghettotech lives between techno and hip-hop, with an emphasis on spoken one-liner hyper-sexualized raunchy themes, gritty beats, and extreme speed. Ghettotech DJs' spin the records anywhere between 150 to 180 beats per minutes, which is approximately double-time of a standard hip-hop track. In contrast to techno, which is generally devoid of lyrics, a prominent feature of ghettotech is its catchy, but minimalistic lyrics. These lyrics were often misogynist or objectifying of women, as exemplified in DJ Assault's hit "Ass n Tities," although artists and producers such as DJ Marquis, DJ Godfather, and Disco D also popularized Jit-focused ghettotech

music with songs titles such as: “Let Me See Your Footwork,” “Jit,” and “Get Yo’ Jit On.” Haleem explains that ghettotech is “like techno but offensive techno, with the vocals.” The genre’s popularity for Jitting continues perhaps because of its unapologetic raunchiness.

Michael Smith explains that by 1994 the Jit became a cultural phenomenon, and as such, “everybody Jitted, but it’s a little bit different now” because “a lot of people don’t know what Jit is in Detroit. Back then, everybody knew. If you didn’t know how to Jit it was like, are you from Detroit?” He continues, “The Jit, depending on who you ask, originated in the 1970s, but when it really got popular in Detroit was in the mid-90s,” which is considered as Jit’s “heyday,” or the “golden age of the Jit.” During this time, the Jit was danced at night clubs, cabarets, outdoor parties, events, high school dances, on *The New Dance Show* (the updated version of *The Scene*), and school yard playgrounds.

Even though the Jit was at its highest cultural peak throughout the 1990s and had a large visible presence, it did not disseminate far beyond the city limits of Detroit. However, the Mad Dancers continued to push the Jit culture forward and other significant Eastside second wave dance crews emerged, such as the Five Deadly Venoms, the Dreamteam, and the X-Menn (the last group belonging to this second wave). These specified crews are important figures for the history of the contemporary Jit as they continued dancing the original foundation and form of the Mad Dancers, which became a guiding philosophy of the contemporary Jit.

Moving Through the Second Wave:
The Five Deadly Venoms, The Dreamteam, and the X-Menn

Descending from the lineage of the Mad Dancers, The Five Deadly Venoms crew formed in 1995 on Detroit's Eastside. In *The Eastside Story* documentary, Scooter, one of the original members of The Five Deadly Venoms, explains that he was influenced by watching the Mad Dancers and studying their style. He says, "I was always around Mad Dancers. I knew some of them. I was sixteen so I was always watching them and that's how I learned by watching. I never learned foot-for-foot, combo-for-combo like everybody doing today. I don't get that. Don't nobody know how to work hard no more. They used to tell me watch, that's how you gonna learn" (Insyncexposures 2016), referencing how dancers can now study other Jitter's dance styles with YouTube and social media sources, which was not available in the mid-1990s.

Following the Five Deadly Venoms, the dance crew Dreamteam developed, which was a merger between original members of The Five Deadly Venoms and new members of the Dreamteam. The Dreamteam is credited for their extreme detail to the execution and smoothness of technique. Mike Manson explains that when watching archival video of Dreamteam performances "you gonna see the most fluid movement." Allen Cannon was influenced by studying the movements of the Mad Dancers and was also a member of both the Five Deadly Venoms and the Dreamteam, his movement style exemplifies this fluidity. Today, Cannon is considered one of the most accomplished and exemplary Jitters in the culture. Many participants describe his style "as the best in the game" because of his effortless and clean execution of technique.

The Facebook video titled “Al Cannon Ft. D. Maree,” with production credit given to “JKing AimShoot,” danced to Prince’s “Private Joy,” presents his clean style and form. Situated in the Ride It Sculpture/Skatepark in Detroit, Cannon dances throughout the hallowed bowl-like structures, almost completely covered in painted graffiti and colorful tagging. Through the traditional music video format of blending narrative with music, Cannon fluently Jits his way through different scenarios in the skatepark, in sync with the song’s driving rhythmic line, while trying to gain the attention of the uninterested female fixated on her smart phone. His masterful footwork overpowers the banal video narrative. Precise implementation of different iterations of shuffles and fluid flagging of the arms communicate legibility of the form. Or in other words, Cannon’s clear style makes it easier to “see” the Jit. Cannon’s purist style suspends the sensation of time. Even though the tempo of Prince’s track is dynamic and swift, through the outlined intentionality of each movement, time is decelerated as his sophisticated footwork and shuffles are rendered as more visible to the eye. Cannon’s detail of form is emblematic of the Dreamteam and their contribution to advancing the Mad Dancers’ style.

The pure form of Cannon and the Dreamteam influenced another prominent dance crew, the X-Menn, created by dancer Ron Hall in 1997. As presented in *The Eastside Story* documentary, Hall describes his dance collective as “original” and “from the old school” (Insyncexposures 2016). Scooter notes that when the X-Menn emerged on the Jit scene that some people argued that they were just copying the Dreamteam, however, the X-Menn have a lasting legacy on the Jit. While they continued to champion the clean

technique of the Mad Dancers' and subsequent groups, they are known for their musicality, dancing deftly in sync with the music. James Broxton Jr. explains because the X-Menn "Jit on beat, they are always on key," a continuation of Jit's dogma. Further, the X-Menn challenged the "boys club" nature of the Jit by adding a female Jitter (Tiki) to their roster of Jitters, which was not commonplace with the previously mentioned crews.

Scooter explains that the originality imparted by the X-Menn and crews that came before no longer exists because "a lot of people lost the originality of the whole game" and then laments, "It's gone" (Insyncexposures 2016). He continues, "the only people you gonna see doing originality is X-Menn. You might see a few other cats, but as far as their generation, that's all you gonna see. You not gonna see it nowhere else, unless the Dreamteam do it or the Unstoppables. And a lot of Mad Dancers, too" (Insyncexposures 2016). Scooter connecting "seeing" to "originality" reflects the values of the Eastside style. Originality is not just about execution (as a Jitter), it is also about being able to see (as a seasoned spectator of the craft). In the case of the Eastside style, removing gratuitous fluff offers corporeal legibility to other serious practitioners of the Jit, allowing them to read the succinct movements of the feet and arms. A few Jitters explained that the way to really see the caliber of a Jitter's footwork is to play a slower music track, because when Jitting to lightning fast tracks the nuances of footwork are more difficult to see.

The X-Menn are also known for taking the Jit international as they traveled to Amsterdam, Holland with the Godfather of techno, Juan Atkins, as a part of his world tour. During my interview with John Nance, a current member of the X-Menn, he

explains that Aaron Atkins, Juan Atkin's nephew, viewed videos of X-Menn performances on YouTube and as such, told his uncle about the X-Menn style. John explains that before they traveled to Amsterdam, Aaron Atkins made the initial connection with the X-Menn in 2007 commissioning the group to perform with Juan Atkins/Cybotron during his live performance on the main stage at the Detroit Electronic Music Festival. Due to the success of this performance, Juan Atkins contracted the X-Menn to perform with him in Amsterdam on one leg of his European tour, which John explains was a pivotal moment for the Jit because it was the first time it had traveled to the Netherlands.

The X-Menn also auditioned for the television show *Randy Jackson Presents America's Best Dance Crew (ABDC)* with hopes to disseminate Detroit's Jit culture to a wider viewing audience. However, they did not make it to the final round of the competition.³⁶ During my interview with John, I ask about the X-Menn's experience of presenting the lesser-known style of Jit to judges who were not only more familiar with other popular street styles, but at times sacrificed display of technique in favor of acrobatics and gimmicks. Asking him what feedback or critiques were offered, I was

³⁶ In 2008, *ABDC* first aired on MTV and due to the decline in viewer ratings, the program ended in 2012 (Wong 2018, 124). The premise of the show pitted various street dance crews against each other with the judge's insertion of various weekly challenges for the crews to implement within their own choreographies, such as "creating human pyramids or incorporating an illusion or exercise" (124). *ABDC*'s formulaic insistence of presenting various dance forms through gimmickry and narrative structures were also being used by other popular dance-based television programs when *ABDC* first aired in 2008, such as *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Dancing with The Stars*.

curious how a street dance style predicated on precise exactitude of form and foundation with very little insertion of unjustified trickery was received within *ABDC*'s show format. John explains that after their audition one particular judge's advice did not resonate well with the X-Menn. He explains there was "one opinion I did not respect, he [the judge] was trying to tell us how to Jit and I was like, well, you don't even *know* what Jitting is though, so you can't really tell us about that." He continues, "And I couldn't understand it because to me, that synonymous with me coming to your house and being like, yeah, this couch shouldn't be right here because it's more comfortable for me to be over there." Instead of "seeing" the unique style the X-Menn brought to the show format, the judges placed them into the "other" category. Their style not only clashed with the homogenized ideology of the show (all street dance styles are "universal" and therefore can implement stunts and tricks) but was threatening to the judge's dance acumen. John continues, "As a dancer, any opinion that somebody has about your dance, you should listen to everybody. But, as a person that is confident in your craft and in your art, you know which ones to separate. You keep the ones that are going to definitely be conducive to building a progression" for the dance technique. This example shows one of the first attempts made within the Jit culture to visually position the underground Jit next to mainstream breakdance and hip hop, on a globally televised show, where shuffles had little chance to compete with backspins.

The Third Wave: Jitting into Y2K and Beyond

Throughout the decade of the 2000s, the X-Menn were still actively performing, as well as many individual dancers from the previously mentioned crews. During this

decade, the Jit was subject to highs and lows as it would re-emerge for a period of time and then go back into the underground and hibernate. Mike Manson explains that when he was in high school in the early 2000s, “all everybody was doing was Jitting, in Detroit. Now, ask me how many fourteen-year olds are Jitting right now, or even care enough to learn. That’s when the culture is dying. So, the last bit of it, it’s us—and I’m getting old.” Even though Mike is fearful for the current state of the Jit, the history reveals the cyclical nature of the Jit that manages to make a comeback after being dormant for extended periods of time.

During the 2000s, the old-guard group form of the Jit has largely been replaced by solo dancers, with the exception of some notable crews, such the X-Menn, Hardcore Detroit, founded by Haleem “Stringz” Rasul in 2001, and The League of Extraordinary Jitters created in 2009.

Although Hardcore Detroit is largely known as a local Detroit dance crew, comprised of a combination of Jitters, breakers, hip hop and house dancers, Haleem also brought international artists and performance and spoken word artists into his collective. Hardcore Detroit is also a production company as the documentary *Jitterbugs: Pioneers of the Jit* was produced, marketed, and distributed under this moniker. Haleem describes Hardcore Detroit as worldwide network comprised of “talented individuals who love music and the arts. We are all professionals; some of us have degrees, some of us are attending school working hard to receive a degree, and many of us, if not all of us have careers and/or jobs while still representing our passion through the arts.” Beyond just competing in dance battles, Hardcore Detroit performs at various events and offer group

and private lessons in hip hop, breaking, and the Jit. Hardcore Detroit has also hosted fashion shows and various genre specific dance battles with breakdance, waacking, and voguing and he pitted house dance against Jit, and Jit against Chicago footwork.

On the Hardcore Detroit Facebook page, Haleem notes the various members of his crew and their prospective artistic and performative mediums, which blends Jitters with b-boy/girls, house dancers, poppers, hip hop dancers, spoken word artists, graffiti artists, photographers, and guest dancers from as far as Japan.³⁷ This multidisciplinary environment also mirrors the diverse demographic of people that comes to Haleem's bi-

³⁷ Stringz (Founder/Owner/Manager/B-Boy/Jitter/House Dancer/D-Town)
Ma-Ma (Original Member/Assistant/B-girl/Hip Hop/Dance Teacher)
U-turn (Original Member/B-Boy)
Jay-Bay (Original Member/Dance Teacher/B-Girl)
DJ Sicari (Original Member/DJ/5e Gallery/5ela/B-Boy)
Tempo (Original Member/Popper)
Sintex (Original Member/Graffiti)
Lichy (B-Boy)
Spidey Roc (B-Boy)
Jaafar (B-Boy)
Nova (B-Boy)
Juss Cuz (B-Girl/Dance Teacher/Studio Owner)
Sasha Rox (B-Girl)
Forever (B-Girl, MC, Spoken Word)
Langston Hughes (MC, Photographer, B-Boy)
Mohammed (B-Boy)
Bryan Marsh (B-Boy and Professional Dancer for music videos and concert tours)
Yagi (B-boy and House Dancer from Japan)
James Broxton (Jitter/D-town)
Mike Manson (House Dancer/Popper/Jitter/D-Town)
Kafani (House dancer)
Tokkyo (Performance Artist/B-Boy/Stunt Coordinator/Personal Trainer)
Reggie "Munch" Turner (Jitter/Funkateer)

weekly practice sessions currently happening in Detroit. The multiple artistic mediums of Haleem's crew points to a shift where other street dance forms were placed in conversation with the Jit in Detroit. Further, because Haleem is skilled in breaking, he advanced his own style of Jit by implementing virtuosic movements into his floorwork, while also paying homage to the Jitterbugs. On Haleem's hybrid style, Tristan says:

Stringz [Haleem] is a genius. He has mastered his body. He's mastered how to transition moves from Jitting into b-boying and back and forth and it looks so seamless when he does it. Like, he'll go from a shuffle into a backflip and jump back up. How he does his movements are so seamless, when he connects his moves together, like he has really mastered his craft in regard to mixing the two together. He is great at Jitting and a great b-boy. So, for him to do both and perfect them and merge them well together, to me— that's genius.

In response to my question if there had been criticisms in the Jit culture of Haleem's fusion of styles, Tristan explains, "I think in the early years, in the earlier times" he received some backlash because "Jit purists will say no! Leave Jitting to just be Jitting." He continues, "Stringz has been in the game for so long, he can beat so many of the people that talk trash. It's like, what you gonna say to him? What you gonna do? Are you gonna battle him? Let him go ahead and decide he want to flip off a wall into a split and start Jitting on you, what you gonna do?" Haleem's hybrid style not only blends Jit with breaking, but at times house dance, hints of Funkateering, and even the traditional style of the Jitterbugs.

This purist mentality, generally attributed to the second wave of Jitters, is not only skeptical of hybrid versions of the Jit, but also wary of being absorbed into the mainstream. As such, Tristan explains that those who want to protect the Jit from departing the underground are "older heads" and "real purists" who are very cynical

about the prospect of the Jit migrating outside of Detroit. Willie attributes the underground nature of the Jit to personal issues one might have experienced with being part of the Jit culture, He says:

some people want it to stay underground and that's only a handful of people. Some people don't see it going anywhere. Because, you know, you got a lot of hurt people, a lot of let downs. People who have tried and somebody told them something and they probably gave up or they felt like they gave it their all and didn't get the result that they was trying to get.

Michael Smith declares that the Jit “is not just a hidden gem” and explains “there are people that don't want anybody to see the Jit and want the Jit to stay in Detroit in an underground tunnel. They want that and I don't agree with that” because he wants to see the Jit reach the masses by going global. Generally, the shared attitude of the younger generation of Jitters feel that most second wave Jitters, or OGs, approve of the new directions some are taking the Jit; however, some are highly critical and maintain that with these new developments of the style that the Jit is no longer the Jit.

The League of Extraordinary Jitters, commonly referred to as just “The League,” are also known for their hybrid style, however they advanced the Jit by blending Westside and Eastside aesthetics, giving equal attention to technique and stunts. The collaborative dance collective was created by Mike Manson, Rell Boogie, Zoe, Mike “Flash” Reed, James Broxton Jr., Wille “Sonic” Hull, Cornelius McNichols, and Brian Scales, with Queen Gabby joining later in 2012. On their new approach to Jitting, James Broxton Jr. explains how Mike Manson contributed to creating The League's distinctive style by “making the Jit look different.” James explains, “because of his form of footwork, he does multiple styles, so he combined them. He mixed [Chicago] house and

footworking with his Jit. A lot of Jitters only Jit with one foot [usually right foot/leg dominant] and Mike taught us to use both,” promoting an advanced technique and style of versatility within the dance crew. Willie explains that some people within the community refer to The League as “hybrid Jitters” and credits Mike Manson for instilling this fusion style into their aesthetic. He notes, “Mike was definitely Westside, but he was and still is one of the greatest teachers. He knew how to take the Westside style of being super, super fast and clean it up.” Here, “clean it up” references the Eastside’s technique of precise footwork. As this danced history has shown thus far, generally the form of Jitting stayed close to its geographical roots of Eastside or Westside. However, here, Mike’s creation of hybrid Jitting not only mixed East with West but Detroit with Chicago.

The hybrid nature of Haleem’s style of moving, Hardcore Detroit, and The League are perhaps a product of global cultural flows, as defined by Arjun Appadurai, who argues that global economies cannot be defined by only a process of cultural homogenization, but rather, conceptualized by a theory on global cultural processes, which are always in flux. Appadurai is less concerned with economic and capital flow, in terms of globalization, and more so with the movement, or migration of people and culture. Appadurai’s notion of a mediascape, defined as, “closely related landscapes of images,” referring to “both the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information,” available to “private and public interests throughout the world” is applicable to the third wave of Jitters in Detroit (1996, 35). The electronically

generated mediascape allows different cultures to view each other, from across the world or in the same city.

This generation of Jitters, many of them born in the late 1970s to the early 1990s, had access to the Internet and other online communication technologies at a relatively young age. They were also exposed to the mash-up movement in the early 2000s, where bedroom DJs spliced together different songs, creating “unlikely combinations, which they distributed through peer-to-peer file sharing services,” and eventually through video format on YouTube in the mid-2000s (Shiga 2007, 94). As such, they had relatively unlimited access to not only the remixing of cultures on YouTube, but also dance videos, of any genre imaginable, and Jit-related social media pages plastered with practice and performance videos of various dancers in the Jit community. Under Appadurai’s notion of the mediascape, the prospect of mixing East and West, Chicago and Detroit are logical. If one desired, she/he could attempt to learn Chicago house without ever leaving Detroit, via the Internet. Jitters growing up the Internet age have access and the opportunity to learn other local dances in a way that previous generations did not, without face-to-face contact. There is perhaps also more of an openness associated with the generation, because of their increased access to integrating new things into their repertoires. The Internet, let alone social media, did not exist during the emergence of the contemporary Jit in the era of the Mad Dancers, Five Deadly Venoms, or the Dreamteam. With the age of the Internet, ideas on the compartmentalization (and remixing) of cultural production have been challenged. Scooter’s belief that Jitting has lost its original essence because dancers are merging other dance styles, such as breaking, with Jit, represents this

earlier era. In his time, he had “never seen nobody breakdance and Jit” and decrees “that is so crazy to me.” What seemed crazy in the Jit culture of the mid 1990s (mixing Jitting and breaking) makes sense to the Jit culture of the 2000s and beyond.

The Fourth Wave: The Jit’s Virtual Demographic

The Internet and social media outlets fostered a cyber Jit culture shaped by online virtual Jit communities, most of them housed on Facebook. The majority of these groups have open membership, however in order to become a member of a closed group one must gain permission from the group administrator. Online communities such as *The Jitt & Techno/House Community*, *Jit Street*, *Jit Street Ave.*, *Detroit Jit Nation*, and *Team Jit (Detroit Footwork Dance Culture)*, to name a few, have connected people who would normally not be in close contact. The virtual demographic of the Jit is mostly shaped by Jitters, spanning the different waves, who have been part of Jit’s face-to-face culture at some point in time. However, this demographic expands beyond the city limits of Detroit by including members who are presumably outsiders (positioned geographically and culturally), though finding out exactly how the members living outside of Detroit discovered the Jit and these Jit community pages is difficult to know. Scanning the member list of one of the most popular group pages, there are over 5,000 members, a number far greater than the amount of people who are currently Jitting in the city today. Most of the members live in Detroit and other cities in Michigan, however quite a few are from New York City, with others from states such as Texas, Alabama, Massachusetts, and even Berlin, Germany.

The advent of these community pages and social media networks not only changed some Jitters' philosophy and approach to the contemporary style, but altered how they learn the dance form, disseminate knowledge, and communicate with each other. As previously mentioned, before the availability of the Internet, both *The Scene* and *The New Dance Show* were the only media produced sources that allowed dancers to absorb the Jit through televised technology in their homes. Learning also occurred by watching other Jitters practice in their basements, in the hallways at school, or in the streets, in real-time. If a Westside Jitter wanted to learn the Eastside style, they had to physically cross Woodward Avenue, the delineating line between Detroit's east and west sides. For the current Jit culture, technology has virtually bridged the geographical gap between Detroit's East and West, though it has not eliminated the Eastside/Westside rivalry.

When Michael Smith learned the Jit in the late 1980s, dancers were either at nightclubs or dancing with each other on the street corners. He explains, before social media existed "families would get together in their basements and teach each other before they would go to battles or circles, or what not." He says that even though social media outlets have taken away from the grassroots, family-centric methods of learning the dance form, virtual Jit communities have brought together dancers from all corners of the city, who previously had very little contact with each other. He notes:

now with this new age you have things like the Internet, Instagram, Facebook—and they kind of took away from how we associated with each other. Now a lot of information that we get, we share the videos and the content with each other, but they are building groups with the Jit community. You get to see people you didn't get to see often and converse with those people.

The ability of Jitters to communicate through social media outlets has fostered not only a cyber Jit culture, but a virtual cypher where Jitters from all across Detroit and beyond can either participate in philosophical “battles” occurring through the written word or just observe on the periphery as spectators. Inside this simulated cypher, Jitters rehearse the numerous debates that occur within the Jit community, such as East versus West, traditional versus contemporary, going global versus staying in the underground, dance technique versus tricks, the purist versus the innovator, choreographic conceptualization versus execution, and Jitting to older, classic techno tracks versus new music, to name a few. Other topics on Jit community pages have included issues of copyright and ownership of the origins of the Jit, and debates as to what technical and performative elements make one Jitter better than the next. Discussions have also asked members to list which dancers should belong to a Jit hall of fame and suggest pairings that would constitute the epic battle of all Jit battles.

Philosophical deliberations have questioned the ontological nature of the Jit, questioning if there is a means to elevate the creativity without comprising the essential foundation and form of the movements—a commonly occurring theme in the Jit culture. These premises detail a conflict between the pre and post-third waves of Jitters, where topics on how to keep the Jit from becoming watered down or too hybridized collide with asking what it would take to remix the contemporary Jit into “JIT 3.0.” Within this cyber cypher, the tension behind the possibility of the shuffle getting lost in the shuffle is palpable.

One common complaint about the negative effects virtual communities and social media have had on Jit's culture is that physically battling in a dance cypher is no longer necessary to maintain or promote one's dance skill. Instead, posting highly produced music videos or practice sessions online can suffice. These online posts reveal not only a dancer's proficiency but also their popularity based on the number of "likes" and the caliber of viewer comments generated from friends and followers. Real-life Jit cyphers and battles are still happening in Detroit, however, not to the degree they occurred in the Jit's peak in the 1990s. It is difficult to know if social media had an effect on this change, though some Jitters believe it could be a possibility. For some, the virtual cypher is a likeness of the physical cypher in Detroit. For the older generations of Jitters in Detroit, exhibiting your skills in the cypher was generally the only way to gain material "likes" and to generate a following.

In opposition to these viewpoints, some Jitters have expressed that the positive effects of the Internet and social media include bringing people together who might never be in close contact, exposing the Jit to a broader range of people, inside and outside of Detroit. This rings true for my research as I would have had almost no access to the Jit without the technology of smartphones, social media, and the Internet. I joined many of these online communities on Facebook and I discovered Haleem's documentary through his Facebook page and was able to watch it on my computer on Amazon.com. After combing through YouTube, Instagram, and other video-sharing sites, I found numerous videos of the Jit and the Funkateer. When I was doing my fieldwork, I myself posted videos I recorded on my iPhone of Jit practice sessions and instantly shared them to my

own Facebook page. Technology even allowed me to conduct a remote interview with a Detroit DJ living in Minneapolis, through FaceTime on my iPhone. These various tools not only gave me access to the Jit but also offered ways for filling in gaps of knowledge in my research. As an example, as I was not able to speak directly to any of the original members of the Mad Dancers, Floyd Mosley's Facebook post presents a condensed genealogy of the Mad Dancers that I most likely could not have gleaned through interviews with my participants. Regardless of these various perspectives that walk on a narrow line between tradition and innovation, this virtual wave serves as a cyber life-line helping to keep the Jit alive and relevant in Detroit.

Conclusion

Toward the end of *The Eastside Story* documentary, footage shows current, real-life Jit cypher battles, exhibitions, and practice sessions, while people are watching or recording the unfolding action on their smartphones. One particular video clip depicts a male Jitter executing his footwork combination and then finishing by dropping to the floor and implementing a traditional backspin from the breakdancing tradition. Another clip presents a Jitter performing a lengthy improvisational solo to a sped-up version of Bruno Mars' "Uptown Funk," a song heard on every major mainstream radio station in the United States in 2014. With these video examples, on the micro-Detroit level, the shuffle not only has gone hybrid but has fled the underground by dipping its little toe in the hyper-mainstream by Jitting to Bruno Mars. These videos starkly contrast the bulk of footage presented throughout the rest of the documentary. Most of the choreographed group pieces and solos were performed to relatively obscure Detroit techno or ghettotech

tracks and the movements stayed very close to Jit's codified movement vocabulary. This purist mentality that many of my participants mentioned is traceable through the music and footwork that generally remained the same over three decades.

As the different opinions have shown, some people in the culture never want the Jit to leave the underground, but others want the rest of the world to dance the Jit *only* if executed with the same movements and technique, to the same musical soundtrack of their respective eras. This is reflective of the second wave philosophy of staying true to the Jit's original roots that pushes against hybridization and its possible effect of transforming into something new and unrecognizable. Like Scooter explains, "everything evolve in time, but at the same time—originality is a must" (Insyncexposures 2016). His usage of the term originality is twofold, it not only indicates the innovation of style but the necessity to remain truthful to the original technique and rules of the Jit. In other words, in his epoch of the Jit, it was not permissible to just imitate or emulate another dance crew's technique and panache. However, even with the demand and necessity to implement new flavor into the Jit, dancers could not stray too far from the original technique, bodily form, and footwork.

On the other side, there is a feeling that the Jit should be shared and can (and maybe should) continue to change, as some Jitters want to see how dancers can transform and innovate the style, including its electronic musical counterpart. Only time will tell how the next wave of dancers present the Jit— however, as a caveat, to paraphrase Scooter, even though everything evolves in time, for the contemporary Jit, staying close to the original shuffle is a must.

Even though there are debates and discrepancies within the culture across bodies and time, what makes the Jit the *Jit* across all the generational waves is the footwork. Since the emergence of the Jitterbugs, all subsequent waves have braided in other influences, beginning with the Mad Dancers who implemented the Flynn as flagging and hints of the Funkateer shuffle, and subsequent waves who have instilled breaking and Chicago house dance. However, what has remained a constant across almost four decades—the shuffle.

This chapter examined the contemporary Jit, noting the developments of philosophy and style across succeeding waves of Jitters over time. In the following chapter, Jitters from these various backgrounds come together for twice-weekly practice sessions in Detroit hosted by Haleem over the course of a year. At these practice cyphers, Jit purists dance with hybrid Jitters; Eastside dances with the Westside; Second waves of Jitters dance with Third waves, insiders dance with outsiders (me), and all the while the contention between tradition and innovation shuffles through them.

CHAPTER VII

DRIVING TO “STRINGZ SPOT”: ENTERING THE JIT CYPHER

Back when 7 Mile was lit, cars bumper to bumper
East Jefferson was off the hook
And then you hit the bridge, cross over to Belle Isle
You’ve been on the route for two hours but only drove a mile
Working hard all week, couldn’t wait to get to Friday
In my CD player, Anita Baker, Guy, Jodeci, and Sade
Oh man, yo’ speakers bumpin’, yo’ system sounding loud
With these fifteens in my truck, said they came to shut shit down
Now dances come and go, they change like the weather
But we started something decades ago and can’t nobody do it better
And I would never lie to you, it ain’t that easy to get
But pay close attention—yeah, long live Jit

—JunesFlow “Long Live Jit” (2018)

To paraphrase a statement Jitter John Nance posted on a Jit community Facebook page: the Jit is underworld, way beyond the underground. Conversing with Gabby Smith about the covert nature of the Jit, she explains she is drawn to the mystique of the underground: “the underground is mysterious. there’s something exciting about the underground because when you hear the word you automatically think of the unknown. It’s something I haven’t seen, it’s something I haven’t heard, and it’s a place that I can’t find that is still within arm’s reach.” She asks, “Where is this place? Where is this magical place? Where is this yellow brick road? It’s like the OZ of street mythology. If I had to really describe it, if anybody says underground *anything* there is an excitement, a curiosity, like you want to know—where is this shit at? Let me find it.”

Through the backdrop of driving to the underground world of Jit through three seasons of fieldwork in Detroit, this chapter presents vibrant vignettes presenting my engagement with the Jit at Haleem “Stringz” Rasul’s twice-weekly practice sessions at the Cass Corridor Neighborhood Development Corporation (CCNDC), most commonly referred to as “Stringz Spot.” This chapter synthesizes my field notes, analytic memos, choreographic analysis, interviews, researcher participation, and written texts. Employing thick-description and a narrative structure, I explain the feeling, sights, and sounds at the practice sessions and the connections I mapped between the findings of my fieldwork, the embodied knowledge gained by learning how to Jit, and the numerous discussions I had with myself while inside the cypher and driving to and from Stringz Spot.

Entering the Cypher: Finding My Footing

Before I officially entered the cypher, I imagined what I would learn, who I would meet, the possibilities of what we would discuss, how dancing the Jit would feel, and questioned how I would contend with being an outsider of this dance culture—I assumed it might be a difficult process. For my fieldwork at the CCNDC, my methods for addressing these concerns were influenced by Deidre Sklar’s “Five Premises for a Culturally Sensitive Approach to Dance.”

Sklar asks a fundamental question for dance ethnography: how can one come to “understand the movement experience of people whose cultural assumptions were entirely different” from one’s own (2001b, 31)? Her approach to this quandary during her own research was threefold. First, through choreographic analysis and observation, she got closer to the “how” rather than the “what” of moving, providing “clues beyond visual

effect towards sensations and feelings of moving” (ibid). Second, she immersed herself in understanding the actions and concepts of the culture, not just learning their dance forms, but having conversations on “virtually anything” (ibid). Finally, she utilized a process she calls “empathetic kinesthetic perception,” which is a combination of empathy and mimesis. Empathy requires a dancer to close her eyes to feel herself “in the other’s body moving,” whereas “visual perception implies an “object” to be perceived from a distance,” with only the eyes (2001b, 30).

Influencing this approach, Sklar claims that ethnographic dance studies are unique because reading the gestures and dances of a specific culture reveal information that might not come across through only verbal language. As an example, Sklar says that how one enters an Episcopalian church will be different from how one enters and moves through a Pentecostal meeting. She also uses the examples of hula and ballet to explicate that “the body postures and movements of someone performing ballet embodies a piece of ‘cultural knowledge’ that is different from the knowledge embodied by a performer of the hula” (2001, 30). She makes the distinction that if she entered into the ballet studio the same way she entered into the Episcopalian church or performed the movements of hula during a Pentecostal church gathering, she could be instantly marked as an outsider who does not belong (ibid).

Like Sklar’s example of the ramifications of entering a Hawaiian luau with a *grande jeté*, for me, learning *how* to enter the cypher was just as important as understanding how to *be* in the cypher. Not to appear so “classically trained and dancerly” while walking into the CCNDC, I attempted to remove some of the ballet

turnout that always seems to subconsciously creep back into my gait when I enter any dance class or performance. While warming up, I refrained from using *pliés*, *relevés*, and *tendus*, or elements of contemporary release technique that would instantly position me as an outsider and instead engaged in plain stretches while standing or lying on the floor. However, as I became friends with people at these practice sessions, over time, I also became less guarded. Walking (slightly turned-out) into the CCNDC with an iced chai latte became a ritual and once I started dancing again after injuring my Achilles tendon, I eventually had to warm up with slow *relevés* and *tendus* to protect my ankle. Generally, I tried to enter the cypher as a *tabula rasa*, which is impossible, but I was aware of small things I could implement in the early stages of my fieldwork to not further emphasize my outsider status.

Sklar's method also shaped my way of being, observing, and dancing in the field in Detroit. First, being an outsider to the Jit culture, her approach allowed me to consciously "live" in my outsider-ness, not as a negative attribute but something positive with the potential to understand details about the Jit culture insiders might overlook. Second, her advocacy for talking to her participants about virtually any topic addressed assumptions that I had before engaging in fieldwork that all conversations I have with my participants must be exclusively focused on the Jit. As a result of employing Sklar's approach, many of my conversations spurred seemingly off-topic tangents that sometimes tracked back to the Jit in unexpected ways. Further, her method of empathetic kinesthetic perception shaped how I approached observing and learning the Jit. Her approach to studying dance in its cultural context permitted me to oscillate between learning through

my eyes, through my body, and through my outsider-ness, as a connected system—allowing me to dance with myself, whether physically or empathetically, to get closer to understanding the essence of the Jit. Finally, her embodied approach suggests that fieldwork does not commence once you are in the cypher, it begins before you even enter.

Winter 2018

Speeding through snow flurries while driving south on 1-75, the seat-warmer is on high and a sped-up version of George Kranz’s “Din Daa Daa,” considered a Detroit Jit classic, blasts from the car speakers. In anticipation of attending my first cypher/practice session at Stringz Spot, I listen to a Jit mix on Soundcloud during my fifteen-minute drive to Detroit. The ultra-fast tempo and chipmunk-esque timbre of Krantz’s nonsensical but evocative sped-up vocals prompt me to imagine what Jitting feels like, even though I have no formal training in the dance.

Nearing the New Center area of Detroit on I-75, the Jit mix rapidly cuts to “Where my dogs at? Where my hustlers at? Where my players at? Where my pimps at?” another Jit classic heard on every underground Detroit radio station in the mid-to-late 1990s. I visualize a flurry of rapid kicks and syncopated footwork, mirroring the intricate beats, like the videos I have watched on YouTube and the dancers I saw at clubs years before. I can see myself “Jitting,” but it makes no sense—I feel no connection.

Pulling into the parking lot behind the CCNDC, my nervous energy matches the hyper-fast lyrics of Cybotron’s “Alleys of Your Mind:” “Alleys of your mind/Paranoia right behind/Alleys of your mind/Out of sync, out of rhyme.” Looking through the

rearview mirror, I see Tristan Hackney closing his car door and walking towards my parked car. I promptly bundle up, wrap my thick black scarf a few times around my neck, exit my car, and greet him with a hug. I met Tristan in the mid-2000s when we both taught at the same dance school in the New Center Area of Detroit. Over the years, we have remained friends. He attended my wedding and he danced a little Jit for me at the reception. During my fieldwork in Detroit, I conducted my first interview with Tristan, and he proposed to take me to the practice cypher to introduce me to Haleem and whoever else would be in attendance. Accompanying me to the practice session was essentially a “co-sign” on my behalf, because the underground Jit culture is small, generally everyone knows each other, and is not easily accessible without a personal introduction.

After conversing for a few minutes in the brisk cold, we walk swiftly through the parking lot, pull open the fire-engine red door and enter the CCNDC. Walking down the narrow hallway, a door leads to a kitchen on the left and the women’s restroom is on the right. Entering the approximately 3,000 square feet of the all-purpose room, I notice a faint dusty scent, and spot Haleem “Stringz” Rasul at the front of the room setting up the sound system, a large speaker connected to his smart phone. At exactly 7:30 pm, a soulful house music track fills the vast open space. Tristan makes the rounds and introduces me to a few dancers who entered shortly after us, however the loud house beats make it difficult to converse.

Methodologically, I assumed that my participant observation would be split, as in: “on Mondays I will observe and on Wednesdays I will participate.” But as I quickly

learned, you do not come to a practice session to sit and observe—you dance. Tonight, Tristan’s Detroit-based online television program *The Grit* is filming a special segment on the Jit. While his crew sets up the cameras and lighting equipment, some dancers begin to warm-up, and I notice the particulars of the eclectic environment. The ceiling is covered with gun-metal colored exposed duct work (which explains the dusty aroma) and long rows of fluorescent lights that radiate a yellowish-white hue. There are mirrors at the front of the dance practice space: five tall vertical panels are placed next to each other with a light film on some of the surfaces. The floor looks to be terracotta stonework with large grout, but upon closer inspection, it is painted to appear as such. The paint has rubbed off in places, visual evidence of the countless hours of dance that have worn down the floor. Numerous round tables are sprinkled around the periphery of the dance space. Because this is a community center, it can be rented for other events such as baby showers, birthday parties, and Jit battles, which Haleem has hosted here in the past, however, the owner/manager of the CCNDC gifts the space to Haleem for his weekly practice sessions. Chairs are also situated around the sidelines of the space, but most of the time people are not sitting in them, but dancing or occasionally socializing with one another.

Hand-painted murals depict different scenes of Detroit on almost all of the walls. On the upper right side of the front mural: “C.C.N.D.C: Cass Corridor Neighborhood Development Corporation” is painted in black. “Detroit” is painted across the top of the mural, rightfully punctuated with an old English D. A large yellow sunbeam extends from the corner, with a rainbow ribbon cascading over the state of Michigan, ending

precisely where Detroit is geographically located. The mural also includes imagery of the Fox Theatre; the Renaissance Center, General Motors' Headquarters, known locally as the "Ren Cen;" Comerica Park, the Detroit Tigers' baseball stadium; the People Mover, an elevated single-track, closed circuit system that encircles downtown Detroit; and various other landmarks. The mural has a throwback aesthetic that is retro but somehow also futuristic. Reminiscent of the art direction in the movie *The Wiz*, the painted cityscape depicts a utopic urban fantasy land, or the "OZ of street mythology," declaring there's no place like "tha D."

On the back wall, another large mural depicts a colorful rendering of the city with images of a divine female presence, maize, mechanized tools, and laboring female hands, juxtaposed against what seems to be Mexican iconography, a likely nod to Mexican muralist Diego Rivera and his *Detroit Industry* murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts. In those murals, Rivera depicts iconographic scenes of rural Mexico and industrial Detroit, illustrating the dance between human labor and the machine through the exploitation of workers, via strenuous gestures, vacant facial expressions, and the lack of personal space due to the bustling factory. Just as Rivera visually connects Western industrialization and progress to Aztec cosmology, so does the CCNDC mural. Both murals gaze back to Mexico's pre-Columbian past, even as they simultaneously look to a future predicated on the symbiosis between the laboring worker and machinery. This calls to mind how Detroit techno functions as a futurist statement with sounds being transmitted somewhere from the future, and its preoccupation with finding the soul in the machine. It also resonates with techno pioneer Derrick May's statement: "we're not really interested in

tearing you up with the scratches and cuts tonight, we're more interested in educating you for the future" (McCready 2014).

The large, canvas painting on the right wall depicts a golden metallic robot, with human-like eyes, appearing to be overworked and depleted, as represented through muted tones of honey and silver. Situated next to another Detroit landmark, the iconic fountain at Hart Plaza, the robot's arm and claw-like hand extend, reaching to catch the bottom of a peach-colored ribbon painted with the words: "Good Times S."

On the left wall, a mural illustrates children in different locations in Detroit, such as community gardens and playgrounds, painted with an old-school hip hop tagging aesthetic. In close proximity to this mural, on the back wall in the far-left corner is a mysterious red door with no visible door knob. Chairs are placed in front of the door, perhaps a tactic to keep people from trying to somehow open the door? In the front left corner, next to the Wizard of Detroit mural, an artificial Christmas tree is placed on top of a wooden palate, next to the mirrors in the front of the dance space. There are lights on the tree, but they are not plugged in to the wall socket. Metallic purple and gold garland drape haphazardly from the branches and a tall, silver ornamental spire-shaped tree-topper balances on the pinnacle of the tree, leaning slightly to the left. Scanning the panorama of the room, one gets the sense that the CCNDC situates itself as part of the Detroit landscape.

As dancers continue to enter the space, Tristan introduces me to Kenya "Standing Ovation" Sutton, who specializes in the dance form she calls beat manipulation, a complex form of bodily music visualization, and Lily Karunanayake, a studio trained

dancer who just began learning the Jit. I introduce myself, explain that I am writing my dissertation on the Jit, and express that I would like to interview them to understand the female perspective on Jit culture. After agreeing and exchanging phone numbers, they move closer to the front of the dance space and begin to practice variations of footwork to a funky breaking track. Tristan introduces me to Mike Manson; we have an instant connection as our vibes sync up. Mike gives off a feeling of accessibility and his deep passion for the Jit comes through as I explain my dissertation project to him. After exchanging our contact information, Mike moves over to where Lily and Kenya are and begins dancing with them.

As *The Grit* begins to record footage of the practice session, more dancers continue to enter the space, while still others are working on their own movement scattered across the dance floor. Some are working on krumping and others are refining their Jit. Haleem teaches me a basic Jit shuffle, which is complicated as the steps are in a pattern of three, performed over music in a 4/4-time signature. Using very little verbal cueing, Haleem demonstrates the footwork with his elegant, smooth, and eclectic movement style. He demonstrates other small variations that can be inserted into the basic Jit, an indication that like any dance form, learning will be contingent on the progression of building from small to big and basic to advanced. After a few minutes of instruction, he moves to the side of dance floor, out of the sight-line of the mirrors, and I continue working on the shuffle alone. Standing at the back of the dance space looking at myself in the mirror, I realize it had been a very long time since I was a beginner in any

dance form—I understandably look like a complete novice. I keep working on the shuffle even though I know my rhythmic cadence is not correct.

Tristan brings Michael Smith over to where I am dancing and formally introduces us. I feel relieved for the distraction and not having to continue watching myself struggle with the shuffle in the mirror. Michael explains the mission of his dance collective, the Jit Masters, and I promptly set up an interview with him. Continuing to chat over the loud electro-beats, we discuss the history of the Jit and other Jit-related subjects, such as the impact social media has had on the Jit and cypher etiquette. Michael tells me he thinks that social media fractures young dancers' comprehension of the Jit because of the short length of clips and their short attention spans. He also says that when it comes down to seeing a dancer's true skill, you can't hide (virtually or physically) in the cypher, a reality I already encountered. After conversing with Michael for a while, Tristan also introduces me to James Broxton Jr. who is close friends with Mike Manson.

The Grit conducts interviews with Haleem, Tristan, Mike, Kenya, James, and Michael in the vestibule of the front entrance of the CCNDC, which appears to be off-limits and never used as an entryway. Because the music is quite loud, this is the only space, with a closed set of double-doors, that can capture the audio of their voices. During the interviews, I continue half-practicing my shuffle while scanning the room to see what the other dancers are doing. I notice the vibe of the space is serious, as some of the dancers are using the mirrors to refine their technique. I instantly realize why I only feel mildly uncomfortable in this moment. There are mirrors in front of me, a reality I have contended with throughout most of my dance career. I ask myself how differently

this situation would feel if I had no way of seeing what my official first attempts at Jitting looked like. Further, I remind myself that traditionally Jitters do not learn with mirrors in front of them. For me, the mirrors provide a source of comforting attachment to something I know and understand, while trying to make sense of this complicated footwork pattern. Soon, the interviews finish and Haleem, Mike, Michael, Kenya, and James begin to perform individual freestyle solos in front of the community garden mural for *The Grit's* footage. Enamored with their rapid footwork, different movement styles, and Mike Manson's ability to incorporate flipping off the wall as a seamless element of his Jit, I quickly retrieve my bag placed on top of one of the tables and record their virtuosic solos on my iPhone.

Around 9:30 pm, the practice session begins to wind down, *The Grit* packs up their equipment, everyone says goodbye to each other and begins to slowly leave the building. I exit through the back door with Tristan and thank him for granting my entrance into the "secret" underground Jit society. Driving home north on 1-75, listening to the same Jit mix, I revisit various moments of the night and engage in car Jitting by practicing my shuffle while intermittently pressing on the gas pedal.

This narrative excerpt retells my first night at the CCNDC and is also a reflection of the argument of this dissertation, Detroit's proclivity for making metal things also effects the city's manufacture of its sonic and kinetic things. Here, Detroit's music and dance are not far away from all things related to car manufacturing. After my first official Jit lesson, I perceive that the Jit is a codified system of interchangeable parts, assembled from the ground up. Watching the dancers expertly respond to the mechanized music

resonates with the representation of the machine-age aesthetic presented in the modernist, Rivera-inspired mural on the wall behind them. Here, this snapshot of the deindustrial present colliding with Detroit's Fordist past traces back to Henry Ford's vision of mass-production as a seamless and efficient dance between human labor and the machine.

Although my dancing was far from seamless or efficient on my first night, I continue attending these practice sessions throughout the rest of the winter. During this time, I meet new people, some of whom I never see again, and some with whom I dance every practice session. Jitters dance with breakers, house dancers, and krumpers, ranging from the beginner to the expert. I am continually fascinated with how some dancers can enter from the cold outside and dance without warming up, a reality far from my own. The more I drive in and out of Detroit to get to Stringz Spot, the more I am learning about the Jit. As the cold days become warmer, my bodily knowledge and understanding of the Jit culture progress, too.

A Detour to Belle Isle

Spring has finally sprung in "the D," the birds are singing, the sun is shining, mom's daffodils are sprouting, and Michigan's pothole problem is in full-effect. The American Society of Civil Engineers just released their study on the condition of infrastructure in the United States and out of all fifty states, Michigan received the worst report card, a D+, largely due to the condition of the roads in Detroit and other major cities in the state (Miller 2018). Driving downtown, blown-out tires and rubber remnants are scattered along the shoulder, most likely due to the many potholes dotting I-75.

Before heading to Stringz Spot, I take a detour to East Jefferson to visit Belle Isle, a 2.5-mile-long island park, long considered Detroit's urban oasis. Because a number of my participants connected Jitting to Belle Isle and automobiles, as they usually co-mingled in the parking lots on the weekends, I wanted to revisit the landscape. In high school, going to Belle Isle was the *cool* thing to do. Packing many people in the car and driving through the park, usually at night, I remember deer grazing on grass next to the shoulder of the road. I also recall hearing Detroit techno and Jit beats emanating from wildly colored tricked-out cars with incredible sound systems in the trunks.

Tristan explains, "Back in the day when we didn't have the boom boxes a lot of us would actually just turn up the radio in our parked cars and actually dance on Belle Isle or dance in the parking lots at Big Boy [restaurant] over on Jefferson [Avenue] and sometimes even at Fuddruckers [restaurant]." He continues:

At that age, all of us were just getting our licenses and all of us would rat-pack into a car. The car was significant because of the music that we could bang. Back in the 90s, it was really a huge thing for you to have sounds in your car. Everybody had the twelve-inch woofers and the speakers and the whole-nine back then. I think that it essentially goes down to the music and the dancers still being synonymous with one another because you can't have one without the other. The car was actually the vehicle that literally carried the music to the dancer.

In the late 1980s through 2000, bangin' or boomin' systems were extremely popular in Detroit and other large cities in the United States. These systems were intricate car stereos projecting clarity of the low (bass), mid, and high ranges of sound through high-tech amplification, equalizers, and large speakers, usually taking up the space of the entire trunk or the backseat space of the car. As rapper LL Cool J said in the opening line

of his song “The Boomin’ System,” “just kick a little something for them cars that be bumpin’:

Strictly for frontin’ when you're ridin’ around
12 o'clock at night with your windows down
Headlights breakin’ cause your batteries drain
Armor all on your tires and a big gold chain
Parkin’ outside of all the hip-hop spots
Push the E-Q and play connect the dots
Leanin’ to the side, people everywhere
The trunk full of amps, there ain’t no room for a spare (LL Cool J 1990)

Although a hip hop song, these lyrics capture Jit culture in the 1990s as described by Tristan, who says, “whenever you had the bangin’ systems you also had the dancers, too.”

Eryk “DJ Arch-E-Tect” Christian shares a similar story on the spontaneous nature of Jitting occurring in parking lots on Saturday afternoons on Belle Isle. He explains that music projecting from the car’s sound systems was typically produced by local techno/ghettotech artists who were extremely popular in the 1990s, such as DJ Assault or DJ Deon. He says, “That's all you heard coming out of the cars at that time, so people would just be driving and all of a sudden, the car parks, a guy just come out, started Jitting and being silly just to get some attention.”

On Jit battles occurring in parking lots throughout the city, Michael Smith says that when he was learning how to Jit street corners, cars, and parking lots were incorporated into the technique. He explains, in the 1990s, “It was kind of like a bunch of cars were parked in the area, on this corner. You go over and there were people flipping off of cars and landing with fast footwork.” Tristian also describes the impromptu nature

of Jitting in parking lots: “I can’t even begin to tell you how many [dance] battles I have had *just* in the parking lot. We didn’t even make it into the club yet. It would literally be a pull-up. Just, oh, I heard you want to battle—let me put in this mixtape real quick.” The merging of parking lots and car sound systems created liminal performance spaces where the parking lot functioned as the proscenium arch and the car’s sound system provided high-quality beats for displaying adroit footwork on the asphalt of the stage.

Reggie “Munch” Turner explains that the creativity of the Jit in mid-1980-2000 followed Detroit’s car culture of “tricking out” and accessorizing the interior and exteriors of cars, like I remember seeing on Belle Isle when I was in high school. In Detroit, driving a standardized, factory issue car was not desirable. According to Reggie:

a lot of these vehicles today, they are just really, really nice cars. Back in the day, people were more innovative with their cars. You might get the Acura, but they would go get the seats and the dashboard and everything piped out. They would take it to Earl Schibe [a company that specialized in repainting automobiles] and get a peach metallic.

On the transformative level of customization, he continues, “you would think it was a Mustang,” but it looked like “a Mercury McLaren. You see what I’m saying, everything now is just more factorized.” Reggie connects the originality of embellishing cars to the same ingenuity applied to Jitting. He says, “That’s the commonality of it all, people were innovative and creative. That is being omitted from the file now. Everything is being cloned and trendified by what we see, what we think.” Reggie also associates the label-driven couture worn by Jitters with the car customization culture:

even the way people dressed back then it was more original. You may have had him wearing Fila, the Bally shoes, she might be wearing Elysee, he might have had on Le Cog Sportif, I may have been wearing Sergio Tacchini, they may have

been wearing Bill Blass, Calvin Klein, Jordache, and Gloria Vanderbilt. You know, it varied. It was about innovation.

Reggie finishes: “Collectively as a whole, we were a lot more economically fortunate back then. It was a happier peace there that allowed those type of mental activities to flow more upstream, versus down. I think the decline and the depression has somewhat infested the minds of the people, it’s basically diluted a lot of things. To some extent, decimated a great deal of things, as well.” For Reggie, the decline of the auto industry diminished this spirit of creativity and customization in Detroit.

Willie “Sonic” Hull suggests that this demand for innovation that Reggie fears is gone is in fact still present today, making connections between Jit culture and the automobile by comparing older models to new cars, and customization and demand. He says that with the older models, “it may not even have a powerful engine in there. But if it has a nice visual, something that people want to see, that’s the kind that we go with. Because that would be the demand. And that is exactly where we are with Jit.” He continues:

back then, you didn't have to maintain. In the 70s, you didn't have to maintain all the fancy moves as it was still more of a jazzy two-step [dance]. You know, you may kick out, drop and everybody had fun, that was it. Or you may be a part of a group, maybe they had a signature move, like the Errol Flynn's, things like that. As time progresses, just like an old car model, now you looking more at a visual perspective. People want to see more style, charisma, or that confidence, that attitude, as it progresses.

Willie notes that because of this demand he “has to practice and study every day, because Jit’s starting to still take off.” Because in today’s Jit culture, “you still always have to put that new spin, that new charisma on it,” like the car.

My quick drive-through of Belle Isle sparked memories of seeing many “hoopties” (an old, beat-up, worn-out car), driving on the Isle, which were just as tricked-out as the newer, shinier models—similar to Willie making the distinction that sometimes in Detroit it wasn’t about the car’s engine power, but how the car looked. But now I’d better hurry over to Stringz Spot.

Early Spring

Walking into the CCNDC at exactly 7:30 pm, the Christmas tree has been moved again, this time to the left side of the dance space, where it is now balancing on some sort of riser system. Almost every week the tree is relocated. Mi’chael Eric Harris, better known as “The Juice,” or the “Alkaline Water Guy,” has set up his healthy beverage station, selling flavored alkaline water and sun teas next to the cut-out space of the kitchen, towards the back wall of the dance space. Mi’chael also teaches choreography to his small group of regulars, and any other dancers who want to join, under the title New Juice Productions Dance Aerobics. With influences of Jit, Funkateer, hip hop, and other dance forms, Mi’chael’s interest in teaching choreography is for cardio/aerobic fitness and well-being. He and his group of dancers usually begin dancing around 8:00 pm, sometimes later. They occupy the back half of room, facing away from the mirrors and towards the right side wall and the entrance.

Making the rounds, I say hello to Mi’chael, Haleem (who is already breakin’ on the right side of the room), and a few other dancers I have never met before. There is an unspoken etiquette of salutation that almost everyone adheres to when entering the practice session. It is a sign of respect to individually acknowledge everyone in the room.

Even if a dancer is in the middle of practicing, it is permissible to interrupt with a hug, bro hug, handshake, fist bump, or just a hello and a nod of the head.

The spatial hierarchy sometimes finds the more skilled dancers closer to the mirrors, whether they are Jitters, house dancers, breakers, or krumpers. However, beginning-level dancers (like myself) also venture into the space closer to the mirrors, which does not seem to be disruptive to the constructed rules and order of the space. Generally, dancers practice alone, some face the mirror and appear to be dancing for themselves and others purposely position their backs to the mirrors. Regardless of their chosen spatial orientation, they are focused on practicing their craft and seemingly less concerned with who might be watching them. The ages of the dancers in attendance range from high school students and teenagers to mature dancers well into their sixties. The demographic consists of mostly African American males, with few females, and other ethnicities as well, such as Asian and Caucasian, depending on the night.

As I enter the dance space, Mike Manson is already there, teaching his female friend some fundamental shuffles. Giving Mike a quick hug, I introduce myself to his friend and I immediately engage in learning his choreography. He teaches a Jit combination in a clear, deconstructed manner. Beginning with the basic movements of the feet, he builds upon that with embellishments of the footwork—very Charleston. He inserts a kick-wiggle-back and develops it with a leg wrap—very Michael Jackson-esque. Meanwhile Mi'chael takes a break from teaching his group. While they practice his choreography, he energetically jumps into learning Mike's movement phrase for about

five minutes, then breaks away to perform a quick freestyle, and then abruptly rejoins his group.

Mike believes in instructing from the ground up. Because of his method of building from the foot, to the ankle, to the knee, etc., I sense that he has taught other beginner-level dancers, as well as studio-trained dancers. Through bodily cues, he relays how important movement dynamics and shifts of rhythmic accents are, especially with footwork and the many variations of shuffles. This complexity reminds me of my training in tap dance, how one miniscule brush of the foot could be executed in a myriad of ways, depending on the sound you wanted to achieve. Mike is also very hands-on with his teaching style. For example, I was not hitting the proper form and exact line of the clinch. The clinch is a movement where your right leg begins placed behind your left leg and then the right leg moves up and over to replace the footing of where your left leg originally was. Similar to driving a car with a manual stick-shift, one must release the clutch and push the gas pedal at the same time, with the same tension, executed with the exact same equidistance, to begin and end in opposite positions. Noticing the incorrect form of my clinch, Mike locks arms with me while he performs the movement, enabling me to feel where and how he shifts his weight to his front leg. Sometimes he uses gentle force to “push” me off-center, in order to help me physically perceive where the movement should end, spatially.

Mike stops teaching choreography so he can work on his own freestyle. He approaches the mirrors and begins working on his fluid armwork of flagging, with hints of girl dance, as his shoulders pop with little shimmies. I join Mi’chael’s group and he

teaches a movement phrase to his small group of dancers, a combination of Jitting and some funk-style movements, reminiscent of pop locking but not as rigid. Mi'chael's teaching style is based in repetition: Kick-wiggle-back into a clinch. Again. Kick-wiggle-back into a clinch. Again. Kick-wiggle-back into a clinch. Rock your body to the right and boom, boom, boom, and kick. Again. Rock your body to the right and boom, boom, boom, and kick. Again. Rock your body to the right and boom, boom, boom, and kick. Robot type arm movement into the bouncy foot pattern that travels in a half circle. Again. Robot type arm movement into the bouncy foot pattern that travels in the half circle. Again. Robot type arm movement into the bouncy foot pattern that travels in the half circle. Here, this is a practice makes perfect type of repetition.

At 9:45 pm, I am soaked in sweat after vigorously practicing the clinch and Mi'chael's short phrase of choreography. As the energy of the practice session cools-down, dancers begin to leave. While walking out to the parking lot, one of the dancers tells me that he quit his job working as a car transporter. He explains that the monotony and repetition of the job killed his creativity and artistic spirit because he was driving cars to "nowhere" for twelve hours a day—an effect reminiscent of Rivera's mural and the depletory nature of repetitive physical labor. I also think of the imagery of the People Mover back inside the CCNDC. The design of the People Mover was criticized and labeled as a mass-transit disaster in the late 1980s because many people felt that the train went "nowhere," but only in one repetitious circle.

Heading north on I-75, I reflect on this conversation and the effects of driving. The monotonous, stressful, and often repetitive task of contending with automobile grid-

lock and circumventing potholes on Michigan roads is maddening. Swerve right, slam the breaks, deviate left. Again. Swerve right, slam the breaks, deviate left. Again. Swerve right, slam the breaks, deviate left. However, beyond the potholes, there is something pleasing about driving my car to Stringz Spot, even when stuck in traffic. Listening to various Jit and techno mixes while driving in and out of Detroit serves as a sonic conduit, helping me make sense of everything I am learning inside and outside of the Jit cypher.

I enumerate all the things I'm learning by studying the movement practices of people whose cultural conventions are different from mine: how the culture works, what the culture is, how learning the Jit works, how *learning* how to learn the Jit works, how different styles of street dance converse and converge at these practice sessions, Eastside technique versus Westside, contemporary versus traditional, and the gendered disparity between male and female dancers, to name a few. Dancing with various teachers reveals different types of knowledge, not easily transmittable through words or text. While dancing in the cypher, no one is telling me to hunch my shoulders and ball my fists, while using a shuffle to transition into other elements. No one has told me to place one hand over the middle of my chest, with a slightly flexed hand, while my other arm reaches straight to the side of my body with my upper body leaning slightly away from the extended arm, at the end of a kick-wiggle-back—a subtle detail I am noticing in many Jitters. The only visual I can compare this description to is the football player's gesture of the famous Heisman Trophy, which is awarded annually to the most outstanding college football player. Cradling the football in his left arm, close to his chest, his right arm reaches out into space, with a flexed hand and open fingers, giving the sense that he is

blocking, or deflecting being tackled by a swath of other football players while pushing forward with prestige, fineness, and perpetual movement. His movement pushes as it pulls. Nevertheless, while the Jit also pushes and pulls in this gesture, it is not a reference to collegiate sports, but proclaims, “I got this, watch this footwork that is so spatially close to you, but you can never replicate.” This is the type of embodied knowledge I have gleaned dancing next to these masters of Jit and as this description shows, within this fifteen to twenty-minute commute driving home, I conduct some of my most generative thinking.

A Quick Spring Interlude: The Embodiment of Detroit in New York City

When traveling from my home in New York City to almost any other city, I usually have to consciously slow my pace of thinking and walking; my body is an extension of the New York hustle and grind. Ironically, during my first trip back home, after being immersed in learning the Jit for two months in Detroit, New York City felt slow. The pace of human traffic on the sidewalks felt more leisurely than usual. The sounds of the city didn’t seem as loud and as profoundly rhythmic. Everything felt different. Because I do not own a car in New York City, even taking the subway, which had been my main source of transportation for over nine years, felt like a loss of control.

The theory of rhythmanalysis, created by Henri Lefebvre helps contextualize this experience. Lefebvre claims that the quantitative and qualitative properties of rhythms offer a complex, holistic rendering of life in the city (2004, 67). For Lefebvre, the relation between the body, space, time, and repetition are inseparable from rhythm as they are

performed in towns and cities as well as within the human body. Returning to New York from my embodied research in Detroit, I was confronted with this sensation that the Jit rhythms, and therefore Detroit, remained in my body even after I had left the city. In other words, the pace of New York City did not synchronize with the rapid tempo of Detroit I had been laboring (overtime) to embody. My body became an extension of the speed and repetition of the Motor City, via the Jit.

Late Spring

Back in Detroit, after a short week away, I enter Stringz Spot, or as I have heard others call it, the “Jitzone,” or “Jitlab,” and my allergies and sinuses are completely inflamed from the combination of the Cherry Blossom trees blooming in New York City and all of the airborne pollen in Michigan. Mike, Lily, and Haleem stop practicing and greet me with hugs, asking how my trip home to New York City was. This was the first time I walked into the practice space and felt like I was part of the community. This is an important moment for my fieldwork, as my participants were becoming my friends.

Lily is now Mike’s protégé as he is training her to be a serious Jitter. They are working on floorwork, or more precisely Jitting while sitting on the floor. Floor Jitting essentially removes gravity from the equation, giving the dancer infinite possibilities to write their signature into the air with their rapidly moving feet. To give floor Jitting another visual, paraphrasing a comment I saw on a YouTube video of a Jit performance, floor Jitting looks like a full-grown baby having a temper-tantrum, expressed through a flurry of lightning-fast kicks, while sitting on the floor. A temper-tantrum, however, points to being wildly out of control of your bodily facility, seemingly devoid of free will

and powered by drives or structures outside of one's consciousness. This sense of being out of control relates to McCarren's automaton, however, I see the movement closer aligned to the human motor, or perhaps a super-human motor. Floor Jitting ups the ante by displaying the skills of the super-Jitter who is not only impervious to gravity but exempt from needing the floor to execute footwork, similar to the image of Hamera's postindustrial Michael Jackson as a super-human motor, moonwalking without a floor and immune to the effects of gravity. Here, the super-human Jitter obscures his own virtuosity by deftly inscribing a million iterations of feelings and ideas into the air, faster than most humans can possibly speak, while perfectly hitting the 16th and 18th notes in the music.

Mike and Lily progress from floorwork into footwork, and I enter the dance space behind them and begin to learn his movement phrase. Mike instructs Lily and me to interlink arms with him to feel the specific beat of a shuffle variation that neither of us is executing correctly. Dancing as a human chain, we pick up on his rhythm through osmosis, not verbal language. Through feeling, not seeing.

Mike moves on to the bisco, the element of Jitting I am having the most difficulty with. The feet and arms move in speedy correspondence, while the upper body inserts small bounces that match the rhythms of the feet and arms. It can be executed subtly, but more often, the movement is aggressive, like the rapid back and forth action of a jackhammer. Rarely getting my feet and upper body to move in accord, I tend to avoid the bisco by exiting the dance floor to go sip my iced chai latte or bottle of water placed on one of the round tables. There is something about the speedy movements of the upper

body that I cannot get in sync with; I'd much rather shuffle my feet. Mike notices that I tend to shy away from digging deep into a bisco and after giving me a look of skepticism that suggests he knows exactly what I'm doing, he usually moves on to teaching me another movement from the Jit lexicon.

Since I first started attending the practice sessions in the winter, Mike has been teaching Jit workshops most Monday and Wednesday evenings, and has since gained a considerable following. Tonight, by 8:30 pm, there are at least twenty people in attendance who at different times partake in learning Mike's choreography. Like most nights, the music plays continuously and we Jit to whatever is on Haleem's playlist, including techno, electro, old school funk, hip hop, and house music. The vibe of the practice session is charged, mirroring the excitement and delight of Michiganders when spring temperatures rise into the realm of summer's territory.

After two-plus hours of Jitting, Mike leaves to attend a dance rehearsal with a hip hop dance crew he is working with somewhere in Detroit. Taking this opportunity to dance with new people, I meander through the space and introduce myself to dancers I have not yet met. A male house dancer is working on house footwork. Noticing my intense focus, he perceives that I am analyzing his technique and then graciously begins to teach me basic house technique. While mimicking his footwork, I am reminded of Haleem's assertion that house and Jit are cousins. As such, it feels important to explore the sensorial differences between these two related styles.

House footwork has a bouncy, but smooth quality, reminding me of the tap dancer Fred Astaire and the way he steps onto one foot and subsequently drags the other leg,

either to the side or behind him. Together, his smooth style and long lines of the drag elongate time. That is how house dance feels in my body, the long drag that suspends over and through time. With housing, the center of weight, movement dynamics, rhythms, and feeling are starkly different from the Jit.

Further contextualizing the rhythmic difference between Jit and house, Anthony Thomas contends that the relationship between Chicago house music and dance is closely linked, as the movements respond to the syncopated rhythms of house music by deliberately, but adroitly dancing *off-beat* (1995, 443). This stylization of movement was a departure from disco's mode of dancing *with* the beat. Thomas states, "It's not that the kids had difficulty getting the beat; they simply had decided to move beyond it—around, above, and below it. Dancing on the beat was considered too normal" (ibid). Thomas's detailed description theorizes how corporeal rhythm can literally break sociocultural ideas of normativity, which is as interesting juxtaposition to Jit's insistence on being on the beat. To summarize what all of my participants have expressed, in different ways: Jitting off-beat is just kicking your legs—it is not Jit. House can play with the beat where the Jit must embody it.

Using the assembly line as a visual metaphor for how I sense these rhythmic differences in my own body, the Jit is like a culmination of a fabricated product, as various components are seamlessly assembled while expertly matching the beats of the music. Gabby Smith also connects the Jit to the assembly line, explaining, "A lot of dancers that I have come across worked for the Big Three and they worked in factories, on the line," and as such, "there are certain mechanics that are incorporated when you're

building a car and it's the same thing with Jit, it's like manufacturing a car." Continuing to explain that with each movement one fabricates their own style, she notices "with each dance you take a piece and then you take another piece and then you take another piece and you just keep building from the dance vocabulary." She continues, "There're so many different dance moves that you can create, which is the same thing for the automobile. You have your different parts, you have your different pieces, you have your gas, you have your doors. Each piece creates this even bigger masterpiece, this car." In the case of the Jit, it is built from the fundamentals: footwork, flagging, armwork, floorwork and the bisco.

In contrast to the Jit's precise fabrication, house dance embodies the movements of the assembly line. For house dancing, detailed manufacture is also important, but manifests differently. The beats of a house track *are* the assembly line and the manner in which the dancer proficiently rides the moving belt of the beat—over it, behind it, or in front of it, are what gives the dance its character, a playful emphasis on flow. While learning various elements of house dance for almost two hours, I had to "unlearn" or detach from Jit technique in order to get into the feeling of house. The house vibe radiates closer to my center where Jit feels more grounded. Dancing with a symbolic box of colorful crayons, the uplifted or free sensation of house allows me to color just outside of the lines periodically, where the cerebral and technical feeling of Jit keeps my steady hand constantly coloring as close to the lines as possible.

By this time in late spring not only do I feel like part of the community, I'm starting to understand the Jit vocabulary well enough that I've developed my own way of

making sense of it. Dancing other footwork forms, such as house, is another way to feel what the Jit is, through understanding what it is not.

Dancing for almost four hours in total has kicked up quite a bit of dust and the thumping pain radiating inside my sinuses matches the rhythm of the deep-bass-beats emanating from the speaker. Taking a break to finish my chai latte, I observe Haleem freestyling on the right side of the space, effortlessly merging house, Jit, and breaking. He is a gestural mastermind for how he integrates different styles together seamlessly. Moreover, the level of difficulty and creativity of his floorwork is astounding. Watching him smoothly transition from bouncy house footwork into a grounded Jit shuffle, I am captivated with his unpredictable movement choices.

It is almost 10 pm and after saying goodbye to everyone, I walk through the humid air of the parking lot dragging my feet. Feeling like my clogged sinuses will explode at any moment while driving home, I have little energy to engage in car Jitting or doctoral level theorization. However, while pulling into the driveway of my mother's house, with the little brainpower I had left, I reflect on the disparate sensations I perceived between Jitting and housing. I question if what Haleem is "manufacturing," by amalgamating these two dancing cousins, is a hybrid by-product of globalization. Reaching into my purple accordion folder for a pen and my memo journal, I jot this question down in the future research questions section, exit my car, and sluggishly "shuffle" into the house.

Summer

On the summer solstice of June 21st, the sun did not set until approximately 9:30 pm, giving Detroiters almost sixteen hours of daylight, which is in stark contrast to the short and usually grey days of winter. Pulling into the parking lot of the CCNDC, that certain summer feeling is in the air. As Haleem exits his truck, young, animated children dressed in white with colorful belts exit the Martial Arts school next door and skip happily through the parking lot to meet their parents. Their extra-joyful bounce denotes that perhaps they are officially on summer vacation. Haleem and I discuss upcoming dance events, notably an outdoor performance at the Detroit Institute of Arts, for which he is rehearsing a piece with Mike Manson, James Broxton Jr., and Lily Karunanayake. Summer has finally arrived and so has the season of outdoor festivals and performances—Detroit can now come out of hibernation. I enter the performance information into my calendar and walk into the building with Haleem.

Due to the high temperature outside, the dance space at 7:30 pm was very warm and humid, even with the AC turned on. Walking through the corridor into the dance space, the door to the kitchen was open for the first time that I've ever seen; I see that it is a standard commercial kitchen, with sinks, an oven, and other kitchen equipment. Continuing to walk, I stop dead in my tracks. Not only has the Christmas tree moved again (pushed into the far corner), but the left wall space, which has been blank since I started attending in the winter, is now covered with an eerie scene from the Netflix series *Stranger Things*. In thick black paint, the English alphabet is painted in three horizontal rows, referencing the scene where Winona Ryder's character discovers that she can

communicate with her missing son through a system using Christmas lights and the written alphabet, similar to the function of an Ouija board. When I ask Haleem who painted the scene, he says he doesn't know. Because he had not watched the series, he was not familiar with what the imagery meant. Ironically, I had just started watching *Stranger Things* this summer as my reward for long days of writing, researching, fieldwork, and dancing. Seeing the alphabet painted on the wall, facing the prime location of dance space was jarring because I had just watched that episode a few nights before. Mike Manson enters the building and I ask him if he is affected by the image. Explaining he is more of a *Game of Thrones* and *Harry Potter* kind of guy, he says he has not seen the series either. Warming up in the space, I tell myself that that the unnerving scene will not affect my Jitting.

While I am lying on the floor stretching, Mi'chael enters the space and sets up his waters and juices available for purchase. I notice that the dance floor has been painted over with black paint and some of it has already rubbed off, presumably from people dancing on the floor. Two new red and yellow paper lanterns are hanging from the ceiling, and I also notice a few long strands of Edison lights hanging from above, wondering if they had always been there and I somehow overlooked them. Walking over to the mysterious red door, inspecting it closely, I realize it is not in fact a door, but merely space for a door, missing from its hinges. The color red is painted on the cement *behind* the wall of the dance space. Another wall must have been built, dividing the space into two large rooms. However, there is no way access the other room. From a distance, the missing cut-out appears to be a red door. Even though I have been coming to Stringz

Spot for over six months, I am noticing new *strange* small details that somehow make little sense but seem to work. The space is ever changing, evidence of all the activity that happens when there are no dancers in the building.

Reggie enters the cypher and after eating his Fattoush carry-out salad, he works with me on some fundamental Eastside style Jit, mostly shuffles and leg-wraps. He also seems unfazed by the new writings on the wall. As Reggie evokes that Eastside style, I grapple with performing *style* versus the *steps* of the Jit; for me, they are difficult to work on in tandem. Reggie's Eastside style is suave, as he does not insert much trickery into his freestyle, such as acrobatics or elaborate drops. He oscillates between watery armwork and clean footwork, in a continuous manner. Reggie does not let me progress into other elements until he feels I have a decent grasp on the movement mechanics. I struggle with the leg-wrap, mostly due to my unstable left ankle that was still healing; this was the first time I had danced (at around 80%) since my injury. A leg wrap begins with the weight balanced on one leg while the other leg swirls through space. At the same time, one or both of the arms mirror or oppose the patterns created by the leg in space. At some point, the arm typically performs a wrapping motion around the kneecap or the whole bottom leg. My leg wrap looks forced and unstable, while Reggie's is graceful and composed. My leg wrap feels how it would look if I were carrying three-full bags of groceries in my arms and trying to unlock and open the door without a key and only one foot.

Reggie also demonstrates his style of Funkateering, which offers the first opportunity I have had to document Funkateering at Stringz Spot on my iPhone. His

Funkateer is difficult to follow with the eyes because much activity is occurring in his body at different times. I move further back in an attempt to gain a wider perspective of the movements as a whole: shaky legs, not as in nervous or lack of strength type of shaky, but as in tensing and releasing so quickly that they shake but are nimbly controlled. His upper body funks against the shakes, with composed isolations of his shoulders, arms, and hands. It seems even his kneecaps are funky.

As the night progresses, I also dance with Haleem, Mike Manson, Michael Smith, Noah Goodman, Willie “Sonic” Hull, Larry Moore from the Four Babies crew, and Ron Hall. I congratulate Ron for being awarded the Kresge Fellowship for his work in dance and choreography, as the recipients were just announced yesterday. Because Haleem has an interest in learning the Funkateer, Ron works with him on the Funkateer shuffle and teaches complicated armwork phrases. Joining the action, I have difficulty with the shuffle because it requires a good amount of weight placed on my left ankle, so I focus instead on learning the armwork. Ron expertly isolates tiny movements in his chest, arms, neck, and fingers, while rapidly shuffling. I am in awe of not only his bodily facility, but of his sense of rhythm. While watching him pop and isolate his movements, I think to myself that he uses muscles that some people may never actively trigger in their entire lifetime.

Through my body, I have a deeper understanding of Ron’s explanation that the Funkateer is divided into two halves, and what that really means. I can only work on the footwork and armwork separately, as they each require deft coordination and speed. This bodily division is reminiscent of the coordination trick I learned in elementary school:

patting my head with the right hand while rubbing my belly in a circle with the left. Here, Sklar's empathetic kinesthetic perception allows me to close my eyes to feel the sensation of merging the two halves of my body by polyrhythmically funk in a figurative box, a sensation I could not achieve through visual perception of the Funkateer. With this first crash-course in Funkateering, the sensation of performing polyrhythmic isolations in different parts of my body felt different from the Jit. The Funkateer feels more enclosed as the choreography did not navigate much through space. I now have a better understanding of how all of the elements of the Funkateer work in tandem, pointing to why Ron and the Unstoppables might be the only group keeping the dance alive. The Funkateer is an impossibly difficult dance style that would presumably take years of consistent, intense study to master and embody.

This reality is different from the fad dances that some of the younger generations are dancing today, such as flossing, the whip, the Nae Nae, the dab, and the shoot. These dances have a relatively short shelf-life (as I am writing this the whip and the Nae Nae are already "so fifteen minutes ago") and are made popular through hip hop songs, viral YouTube videos, and videogames. Unlike the length of time required to learn the Funkateer or Jit, people can learn these dances in a few minutes to a couple of hours, which I think is a positive attribute. Fad dances generally offer people the opportunity to move to music, regardless of their dance and music acumen. However, there is a whole discussion that could be had here on the negative aspects, related to capitalism, consumerism, consumption, and branding as more important than presenting artistry—far too much to address here. I am also reminded of conversations I had with some Jitters

who feel that these quick and relatively easy dance forms have deterred young people in Detroit from learning the Jit. However, during Jit's heyday in the 1990s, there were also hip hop fad dances, such as, the running man and the Roger Rabbit that clearly did not prevent young Detroiters from learning how to Jit. The difference here is really between learning a particular step (the fad dances) versus learning a dance form.

Later that night, a visiting house and hip hop dancer from Paris enters the dance space. Haleem explains that visiting Detroit was on his bucket list and most of the music on his iPad was J Dilla, Slum Village, and other underground hip hop and techno Detroit based music groups.³⁸ The guest dancer, whose name I did not hear because of the loud music, says hello to everyone and he greets me with a double-kiss, in true Parisian fashion. J Dilla's "Shouts" plays and suddenly an impromptu master class ensues. Reggie, Haleem, Michael Smith, myself, and at least five other dancers who I did not know, join in learning the French dancer's old school influenced hip hop movements, which feel familiar in my body because of my exposure to and training in hip hop since the late 1990s, at dance studios in Detroit and New York City. After almost a half an hour of continuous movement, I am contentedly drenched in sweat. Because recovering from my Jit-related injury has been distressing, being able to dance at near 100% feels monumental.

³⁸ J Dilla (James Dewitt Yancey 1974-2006) is a hip hop producer and DJ from Detroit who emerged in Detroit's underground hip hop scene in the 1990s and was also a member of the group Slum Village.

While rehydrating on the side lines, Shannon Sailes, known as the “Dancing Usher” from the Detroit Pistons walks into the space, followed by other younger krump dancers. Shannon gained viral-level notoriety in 2013 when his Pistons dance-cam/dance-off segment went viral on YouTube, amassing over two-million views. Shannon also appeared on NBC’s *Today Show* and ABC’s *Jimmy Kimmel Live* and *Good Morning America*, where he discussed and reenacted his dance-off movements, a hybrid of some of the popular hip hop dances previously mentioned, pop/locking, funk, roboting, and a bit of the Jit (Romeo Amaro 2013). Shannon is an amazing mover as he can easily blend all of these contrasting forms into one cohesive piece.

A sped-up version of “Knights of the Jaguar,” a classic contemporary Jitting track, plays, one of the few Detroit techno tracks with a salsa vibe. I say hello to Shannon, and after chatting for a few minutes, he continues to make the rounds of the room. Positioning myself closer to the mirrors, I work on my Jit shuffles, attempting to improv for this first time. The improvisational nature of the Jit is complex, and like the bisco, I shy away from freestyling. As most of my studio training in dance forms such as ballet, contemporary, and jazz were predicated on learning choreography, improvising does not feel “natural” in my body. Watching Mike Manson freestyle is where empathetic kinesthetic perception allows me to really see how all of these interchangeable Jit parts can connect, in infinite, wildly imaginative ways. Through his body, I can also empathetically feel his freestyle, which feels like a spinning top with brisk erratic changes in direction, simultaneously rising gracefully to its point (of his shoe) to jump

onto the surface of the wall, only to half-flip off of it. Mike is like a mad (footwork) theorist who never purposes the same shuffle twice.

During previous practice sessions, Mike encouraged me to improv because he felt I had a strong enough understanding of the foundational steps. Nonetheless, I continue practicing the choreography he taught me. Even with general knowledge of basic shuffles, armwork, leg-wraps, and other elements, my Jitting improv experience resonates with how I feel when I speak Spanish: I can understand the words, but when trying to communicate, sometimes my sentence structure falls apart. It is not a matter of lacking vocabulary; the problem occurs between the words. After six months of training in Jit on and off since February, I have a better understanding of what makes Jit difficult to learn and perform: transitions. To paraphrase the late American jazz musician Miles Davis, music is the moments between the notes. Davis cautioned musicians not to play what is there, but to play what is *not* there. Likewise, the Jit requires stylized transitions and the space *between* each of these movements is where the essence of the Jit really lives.

At 11:30 pm, I say goodbye to my dancing friends. Shannon and I walk out into the sweltering parking lot and discuss some ideas he has for future dance projects. Expressing his frustration with how only negative images and stories of Detroit's "living ruins" are presented in the media, he wants to find creative ways for people outside of the city to know about Detroit's unique dance culture. Meanwhile, under the bright streetlights of the parking lot, a spontaneous krump cypher relocates outside, perhaps because there was not much krump music on the playlist tonight, or they could not resist the charms of the warm summer night beckoning them to come outside and play. Here

krump music loudly emanates from a boomin' car sound system, while the talented krumpers battle each other with aggressive stomps of their feet and hard-hitting angular slashes and swings of the arms.³⁹ I am reminded of my discussions with Tristan, Michael, and Eryk and my trip to Belle Isle in spring about the importance of cars and parking lots to the dance.

After watching the krump cypher, I say goodbye to Shannon and the young krumpers while entering my car, parked right next to the battle. With the AC on full blast, driving north on I-75 at almost midnight, I think about the electric vibe of the session tonight and the influence Michigan's extreme seasons have on the mood and length of the practice sessions.

Almost home, I scan the radio channels and the hip hop song "Rolex" plays, an example of a fad dance that went viral through its music video. The lyrics say, "I just wanna Rolly Rolly Rolly with a dab of ranch/I already got some designer to hold up my pants/I just want some ice on my wrist so I look better when I dance." Rolly, the song's corresponding dance looks like this: the dancer raises both hands to frame the face, with the palms facing each other, the elbows bent at a 90-degree angle, parallel to the floor. During the song's three "Rollys," isolating the lower arm and the elbow, the dancer moves both hands in small circles, which functions as a corporeal word play that displays the metaphorical Rolex one is wearing on their wrist *through* the circular (Rolly) movement.

³⁹ Krumping appears to look hyper-aggressive and ferocious, however, it serves as an alternative to *actual* violence.

Listening to the song, I think about these fad dances in comparison to the Jit and even ballet, as both forms take many years, perhaps decades to understand and execute. I think about the numerous commonalities between the Jit and ballet: both are highly competitive, both have a codified dance vocabulary with their own versions of footwork, legwork, and armwork, both are built and usually taught from the ground-up, and both are associated to virtuosity and deft skill. Here, I am left with the sensation that perhaps my dance world was not as far away from the world of Jit as I had originally thought before I entered the cypher on that first night. We share a common understanding of what a disciplined bodily practice feels and looks like, even though our individual cultures, and all that entails, are drastically different. This is not an effort to place the Jit into a framework of Euro-American classical dance, but to recognize that properly dancing the Jit requires the same level of expertise, bodily intelligence, and discipline that has long been associated to ballet. There is a reason Jit is called “footwerk.”

While exiting my car, the strong scent of gardenias from my mother’s garden blends with the warm breeze that swoops across the back of my sweaty face and neck. Walking towards the backyard of the house, Tex, my mother’s fluffy black cat skeptically watches me through the window as I attempt to perform a hybrid style of footwork, combining Jit with ballet *frappés*, by adding rapid, sharp strikes of the ball of my foot, into a kick-wiggle-back, which ultimately feels fragmented and wrong.

Opening the gate to the backyard, my sister Amber is doing some late-night watering of the flowers and I greet her with a super-exaggerated *grand jeté* that finishes with a right foot shuffle into a clinch. Suddenly, an impromptu Jit session ensues as she

asks me to teach her some basic Jit footwork. I demonstrate the first iterations of shuffles that Haleem and Mike taught me and even though she catches on to the steps quickly, there are some “technical” issues. Because she trained in ballet, contemporary, jazz, and tap for many years and was also a part of the house music scene in Detroit, her Jit bounces like a house vibe and turns-out from the hips like a ballerina. In this crash-course moment, I come full circle. Through her turned-out kicks with pointed toes, I empathically feel her contending with the feeling of the Jit—reminding me of my first experience of walking into the cypher as a complete outsider, with those same turned-out hips and feet.

I continued attending Stringz Spot throughout the rest of the summer. After Labor Day weekend I traveled home to New York City and began writing up my research while acclimating to the different tempo of the city and the reality of not driving a car to arrive at something—either a physical location or a theory or question for future research. In October, I traveled to La Paz, Bolivia with Mike Manson for a month-long choreographic project, discussed in the next chapter. We Jitted in the jagged Andes Mountains of La Paz, with little oxygen at 13,500 feet elevation, a stark difference to flat-as-a-*panqueque* Detroit, situated at sea level. Over the holiday season, I traveled back to Detroit, where I conducted my last bit of fieldwork, tied up a few loose ends, and officially said “see you soon,” but not goodbye to my dancing friends. As a final note, on my last official visit to Stringz Spot, the Christmas tree was finally lit with vibrant white lights and somehow the tree topper was still *leanin’ to the side* like LL (Cool J)—with a slight tilt to the left.

Exiting the Cypher: Some Reflections on Being, Seeing, and Feeling

As this chapter has shown, during my fieldwork at Stringz Spot, there were three major constants: really loud music, the continuous shuffle of the Christmas tree, and the inevitable change of seasons in Michigan. Beyond this, some nights hardly any dancers were in attendance and other nights the dance floor was bursting with sweaty bodies, comingling and communicating through their different dance styles. I never knew who would come through the space, who I would meet, what dance style I would be exposed to, and what conversations I would attempt to have over the loud music. With all of these issues to contend with, I relied on my intuition of when to be less in my thoughts as a “formal PhD candidate researcher” and more in my emotional and sentient feelings as a dancer. I found ways of being in both states of consciousness as I had to (literally) “learn on the road,” while driving in and out of Detroit and entering and exiting the cypher, week and after week. Being a dancer, thinking through my body is hardly a foreign concept, however, attempting to learn a dance form in its real-life cultural context, different from the dance forms and culture I am accustomed to, brings a different awareness and responsibility to how I see and feel. I also had to learn through being an outsider, with all of my assumptions, fear, and ignorance.

Sklar’s approach to seeing, feeling, and being also helped me contend with the traumatic experience of spraining my Achilles tendon while in the field. With that unfortunate event, I felt like a complete failure and that my research would suffer because I could no longer participate in learning the Jit. However, even while limping around the

cypher, I slowly found ways to still learn through my eyes and my body, aided by props or even lying on the floor. As an example, because I could not bear much weight on my left foot and ankle, I employed “chair Jitting,” which allowed me to continue learning through my body but with a different sense of kinesthetic weight. Because I had this altered sense of gravity, I noticed how one beared weight impacted the aesthetic of the shuffles. Here, seeing and feeling led me to this small detail, which I might not have been otherwise in tune with, notably because footwork usually moves faster than my eye can sometimes detect.

During my fieldwork, sometimes my body told me how to see and other times my eyes told me how to kinesthetically feel. Thus, I could not have developed an understanding of the Jit as a type of movement knowledge through observation alone. Thinking through my body, I made sense of the histories, disputes, and customs that shape this danced culture through the embodied practices of repetitively dodging potholes on I-75, entering my mother’s house and backyard, a different cultural reality than the CCDNC, walking through the altered temporal sensation of New York City, and dancing inside the cypher, where all of these elements implicitly convene.

Thinking-through-doing brought me closer to seeing the broad-sweep panorama of the Jit and all of the overlapping webs of significance, whereas empathetic kinesthetic perception brought me closer to feeling the Jit as a culture, as a history, as a bodily practice, as a corporeal language, as a discourse, as a philosophy, as a way of life, as a way of moving through and out of Detroit. Here, I am able to imagine myself in the Funkateering body, moving through each tick, flick, isolation, hit, shake, and sharply

pointed index finger. As a baby (apprentice) Jitter, I envision my Jit footwork as lightning fast with powder emanating from the rubber bottoms of my Mint green sneakers.

Through immersing myself in the world of Jit, learning through my body felt accelerated, perhaps because of how fast this dance form is. In this case, my body's intelligence was much faster than my eyes.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION: “JIT HOP”

Your streets witness our struggle
Your bricks are our rage
through the emptiness of each house shuttered, of each factory closed
We’ve lived through the ups and the downs
But we remain, Detroit
My home
The home of Motown, Cadillac, and Joe Louis
Through all of this, we cannot be defeated, because we have never been defeated
You’ve built us, you’ve moved us, you’ve shaped us
Sometimes down, but never out
Take strength in us, your people
Stay up Detroit!

—Eminem “Letter to Detroit” (2009)

On the first page of this dissertation, I argued that the economic and social infrastructures of Detroit could make it difficult to leave the city. This conclusion considers if the Jit can leave Detroit and what happens when it does? Because almost all of my participants mentioned hip hop, compared Jit culture to hip hop culture, or purported that Jit is Detroit’s version of hip hop, the question remains: why did the Jit not migrate far outside Detroit’s city limits whereas hip hop has travelled to almost every country on the planet? A more in-depth comparison reveals that even though both dances emerged from the streets of two chief industrial-powerhouse cities at roughly the same time in the early 1970s under similar economic conditions, their routes out of those cities are quite different.

This chapter first features some of the connections and differences between both the Jit and hip hop culture. I discuss the various ways my participants make connections between them and present some of their ideas on why the Jit did not go global. Then, I address how Michael Smith's dance collective Jit Masters and Mike Manson teaching master classes in La Paz, Bolivia complicate these established narratives and provoke questions for future research.

The Jit and Hip Hop: Parallels and Divergences

Jamaican American DJ Kool Herc, hailing from the Bronx in New York City, one of the pioneers of hip hop culture states, "hip hop is the voice of this generation. Even if you didn't grow up in the 1970s in the Bronx, hip hop is there for you" (Chang 2005, xii). Hip hop culture consists of main five elements: DJing, b'boying-girling/breakdancing, MCing/rapping, tagging/graffiti, and knowledge. Jorge "Popmaster Fabel" Pabon, a pioneer of hip hop dance, deftly defines the first four elements. He states:

Each element in this culture had its own history and terminology contributing to the development of a cultural movement. The common pulse that gave life to all these elements is rhythm, clearly demonstrated by the beats the DJ selected, the dancers' movements, the MCs' rhyme patterns, and the writer's name or message painted in a flowing, stylized fashion. (2006, 19)

While Jit culture does not include graffiti or rapping/MCing, it does share three of the five elements with hip hop: knowledge, dance (Jitting), and DJing (techno music).

The Jit and hip hop emerged from similar circumstances around the same time. Tricia Rose, for example points to deindustrialization and technology as influential factors in the development of hip hop, offering an important yet under-examined perspective on hip hop's development. She contends that New York City's

deindustrialization influenced hip hop as most of the industrial plants in the borough of the Bronx, and other locales in the city, were relocating to places outside the city or ceasing all operations (1994, 22). In the face of this loss of industry, Rose argues hip hop sought to “give voice to the tensions and contradictions in the public urban landscape during a period of substantial transformation in New York and attempt[ed] to seize the shifting urban terrain, to make it work on the behalf of the dispossessed” (ibid). She contends hip hop must not only be examined through the lens of Afrodiasporic practices, but also through examining New York City’s industrial landscape of the 1970s, which demonstrates how technology and economic transformations influenced hip hop as well (1994, 23). Hip hop is, as Rose argues, also deeply technological—not unlike the ethos behind Detroit’s futuristic, machine-driven music/dance culture.

In 1970s street gangs, whether in New York, Detroit, Los Angeles, or other cities used dance as a strategy for communication and prestige, not unlike graffiti and tagging. However, instead of using paintbrushes and spray paint cans to tag their turf, they used their bodies, notably their feet and hands, by dancing intricate “tags” and “gang signs” that denoted their gang affiliation, geographical location, and movement style. As an example of how gangs from Detroit and California both used corporeal inscription, Haleem compared the Flynn to the Crip walk. In the 1970s if you were not a member of the Errol Flynn’s it was dangerous to perform their signature hand movements in public places or at parties. Haleem says, “Now anybody can do it, but it wasn’t like that before. You had to be in the Flynn gang to do that. It’s like Crip walking, now you see people Crip walking on videos now but back then, you had to be part of the Crips to do that.”

Originating in the 1970s, the Crip walk is a form of footwork associated with the Crips, a gang from South Central Los Angeles and Compton. Early iterations of the Crip walk were performed with simpler footwork patterns spelling out the word C-R-I-P. Like the Errol Flynn's practice of communicating with their hands to claim their turf and rank, members of the Crips performed their style of footwork at parties, displaying their gang affiliation (Goldsmith and Fonseca 2019, 143).

Beyond similar circumstances in their emergence, many Jitters find similarities in the body vocabularies of the two forms. Members of the X-Menn explain the resemblances between the movements of breakdancing and the Jit:

Jittin' has the most similarity to break dancing. It's like a simple form of breakdance to faster music with less acrobatics. We have our footwork (Jittin' term also) they have they uprock, we have our groundwork (footwork performed on the ground) they have they six-step, they have windmills, freezes, and other acrobatics and we have drops (the acrobatic part of Jittin'), as you can see, it's a very similar format. It's also a dance that came from the streets like breakin' did with a similar history. It's just Detroit history. And I look at where Rock Steady and other b-boy crews took breakin' and that's where the X-Menn gone take Jittin'. Jittin' is also an open dance where you can incorporate other dance styles cause a lot of Jitters pop and lock as well as Jit (but not at the same time) and it's like it expands Jittin', which also gives us the one up on some other dance styles because I can't see a juker or a krumper adding popping or locking to they style. And Jittin' can be compared to locking by their system. Just like there are certain moves that must be done with locking to indicate that you are locking (basics). Like your points, locks (most important), the Scooby Doo, Skeeter Rabbit, scoota-bots, and other moves are basics for locking then you add your style. (Zarazua 2008, 1)

Johnny McGhee says that in the 1970s the "voice" of hip hop culture was being heard in Detroit as, "everyone was popping and locking and when the 80s hit everyone was breaking." However, the Jitterbugs, "never crossed the line," as they "continued to evolve the movement, which is the Jit, we stayed with our Jit" (Reed 2014, 26). Haleem

contends that “the Jit is Detroit’s hip hop dance,” what he sometimes calls “Jit Hop,” as it “communicates the relentless quality of our city that continues to thrive despite the circumstances of the past,” circumstances that include the effects of racial inequality and Detroit’s deindustrialization.

And yet, there are significant differences that distinguish the two forms. For example, Tristan considers Jitting a subgenre of hip hop because of different music choices. He says of the Jit, “the music is more techno than hip hop; we started out dancing to a lot of techno music, not necessarily hip hop stuff, per se. At one point, we really only liked to dance to techno music, like Juan Atkins and Model 500.” Asking Tristan why he thought Jitters were drawn to techno music versus hip hop, he states, “the beats. The beats per minute were different. Jitting has its own specific tempo and its own beats per minute versus your average song.” As previously discussed, practitioners of the Jit adopted newly-emerging techno as their preferred musical form because its syncopated, assertive beats-per-minute, extended track length, and continuous rhythmic breakdown were conducive for performing the Jit’s intricate patterns of footwork, at tempos faster than commercial pop songs or hip hop tracks offered.

Why Did the Jit Not Go Global?

While hip hop has migrated to almost all corners of the globe, the Jit has largely remained in Detroit’s underground for over four decades, with rare exceptions. One fundamental difference lies with the directionality and purpose of their diffusion outwards. Much, though not all, of hip hop’s dissemination into global cultures has been through the commodification of hip hop as something that can be bought and consumed,

tailored to any specific culture, whereas the Jit taking trips to China, Zimbabwe, the Netherlands, Paris, and most recently Bolivia, is due to the initiative of dancers within the culture traveling to these other cultures with the intent to disperse the knowledge. People have seen something universal in hip hop that they want to embrace; perhaps in comparison the Jit feels too “niche,” or too specific with its strong Detroit identity. But still I wonder, how and why has the Jit existed for over forty years and has not been appropriated into the mainstream and commodified like hip hop? I posed this question, as well as other hip hop specific questions, to Jitters in the dance community to hear their theories.

The X-Menn believe that one of the reasons the Jit has not gained mainstream success is because “a lot of artists from Detroit never mention Jit or say nothing about it. So, we never got that push by our hometown artists like Chicago did. I guess Detroit rappers figure dancing will take away from their image but half the guys my age that still Jit or used to are ‘hood.’ That’s why we still in the hood Jitting” (Zarazua 2008, 1). Haleem thinks that issues of race are partially responsible for keeping the Jit a local phenomenon, however, it should be noted that hip hop also came out of black and Latino culture in New York City and on cities on the West Coast, which did not thwart its global success. Haleem says, “I feel like since we are the blackest city in the United States, back in that time who’s really going to want to dig that deep? You know what I’m saying? And also piggybacking on that, the ‘67 riots—this is just my personal observation. It just seemed like everything was going downhill slowly from that point on and we are still in the aftermath of it.” As a tangible example of the impact the riot/uprising of ‘67 had on

the city, Haleem says, “Since the riots you go from Motown to Black Bottom.⁴⁰ You know all these different things that slowly, slowly, slowly went down. Even when I was getting out of college people were [still] moving out [of Detroit.]” As Haleem notes, the aftermath of these histories still resonates today, reinforcing stigmas of Detroit’s barren and dangerous landscape. However, as traumatic as these events were for the city, the disturbance fostered a cultural movement that gave Detroit its own voice (not unlike the Bronx) to contend with issues of racism and deindustrialization.

New York City’s status as the cultural capital of the United States meant that there were structures like the movie and music industries already embedded in the city that could fairly easily expose a large amount of people, outside of the underground scene, to breakdancing and the other elements of hip hop culture, which was not possible in a post-Motown Detroit. In this regard, making Detroit marketable was a hard prospect, unlike New York City. Haleem offers a theory that points to Detroit, at large, of not being worthy to matter to American mainstream culture, at the level of New York City and California. He says, “one [reason] we could say—(laughing)—bad timing. Like as far as the cameras wasn’t here. At the time they didn’t need to be—the cameras were in New York and Cali.” According to Haleem, as early as 1980, Jitters were already attempting to make an impact outside of Detroit by auditioning to dance in Hollywood movies

⁴⁰ The Black Bottom neighborhood, named by the French settlers for the soil’s black color and texture, was at one time the center of commerce and social life for Detroit’s African American residents. Black Bottom was demolished in the 1960s to build the Chrysler Freeway and Lafayette Park. Many of the residents were relocated to the public housing projects of Jeffries Homes and the Brewster-Douglas Projects Homes.

representing hip hop dance culture. He says, “There was a group who auditioned for I think *Breaking* (1984) or *Beat Street* (1984), or one of those, and they were like that close.”

Mike Manson speaks to a cultural mentality, bound in politics, that keeps the Jit from being introduced to other street dance cultures. He says, “One thing about Detroit Jit and Detroit culture that I don’t like is that we don’t show love. Even if it’s built on the structure of politics, it being built the right way can help make this thing go further. Because, if that’s the case, look at poppin. Everybody in the world knows what poppin is.” Mike continues, “Everybody in the world know what house is. What’s even coming back is old hip hop. We gotta get there first before we shoot everybody down. Because if we shooting everybody down how do you keep the culture moving?” Kenya offers a similar theory on the negative aspects of the culture’s mentality:

the Detroit culture, we are always shooting for the stars and always trying to be more creative by stepping out of the boundaries, but sometimes we get this mentality where we are too busy looking at everybody else, trying to beat everybody else. We also have those people that are holding us back just because you don’t like the style, or you don’t like the way that they are doing it. You don’t like their dance because they are not dancing like you were ten years ago. And that’s one of the arguments.

Michael Smith says that exposure to cultural beliefs at a young age can limit one’s world-view, comparable to the mentality that divides the Jit culture. He says:

so, everybody’s not in communion in the culture at the moment. There is enough that we are able to keep coming together and keep pushin’. The majority accept but there are outliers here and there. Everybody has the way that they feel because if I was raised this way, I know nothing else other than how I was raised. And that’s kind of how it is in the Jit culture. Me being that I learned how to Jit in one culture and I evolved in another culture, I can kind of listen to both sides and I can get backlash from both sides as well.

Kenya says, “Jit [culture] has the love and the care where they want to see it grow. But, what the other culture part of it is, you have people in the culture—remember I said it’s like connecting the dots, we are all connected. We are still connected to some people that are negative about letting it go, letting it evolve.” Kenya explains the ramifications of the culture allowing the Jit to go mainstream. She says, “of course, we don’t want the Jit to get whitewashed or to go Hollywood or anything like that and people butcher it. Of course. But, that’s up to the culture, the people that’s connected to it, to actually show them or teach them the right way to do it.” Kenya’s statement also points to another responsibility of belonging to the Jit culture, the obligation to protect the dance form from being watered down by teaching the dance form within its proper cultural context. She continues, “We don’t want people to look at our culture and then take it and then try to do it in their own way. This is why we need to get in the studios, start traveling, start connecting with people, like with Mike [Manson] and Queen Gabby and everybody else. So, whenever someone wants to learn Jit, they will learn it the correct way, instead of actually watering it down.” These various perspectives on Detroit’s invisibility, cultural mentality, issues of racism, and cultural appropriation, as factors contributing to the Jit remaining in Detroit, reveal that arriving at an answer to this question is quite complex.

Mike Manson believes that music may also play a key factor in getting the world beyond Detroit to take notice of the Jit: “if the music doesn’t grow with the times,” by including new sounds reflecting how the Jit culture develops the dance form and he is

“still Jitting to the stuff that they made in 1980 and 2001, that mean that our DJs aren’t growing. It’s our DJs that’s important to keeping this culture moving.” Mike continues, “So, when you don’t have the music growing—here’s an example. This might be corny, and I agree with this, but like imagine putting Migos, the rappers, to Jit music.⁴¹ The kids might like it” and “people will wanna really rock with it.” Although Mike does not agree with taking Jit music to the realm of current mainstream hip hop music, he realizes the value and necessity of such a tactical move. Without insertions of recognizable sounds, gaining global traction could be difficult; the future of Jit music and dance culture could be left behind.

Jitting Outside of Detroit

Over the past four decades, various dancers have taken the Jit outside of Detroit: The Jitterbugs’ at Idlewild, on the North American Auto Show Circuit, and on the segment on *So You Think You Can Dance*; The X-Menn in Amsterdam with Juan Atkins; Queen Gabby and Mike Manson in Paris; Kenya “Standing Ovation” Sutton and Mike Manson on *So You Think You Can Dance*; Jittin’ Jesus/Genius appearing on *Live To Dance*; and Haleem in China and Zimbabwe, as well as teaching Jit to dance majors in various dance departments in the United States, such as Columbia College Chicago, the University of Michigan, Wayne State University, and Eastern Michigan University.

⁴¹ The Migos are a North American hip hop group from Georgia, largely associated with the musical genres of trap and mumble rap.

This section of this chapter focuses in on two particular Jitters, Michael Smith of Jit Masters and Mike Manson, both strong proponents for spreading Jit culture beyond its current context.

Jit Masters

Michael Smith is the creative director and founder of Jit Masters, a dance collective of Jitters who teach Jit to children and adults in the traditional dance studio setting. Jit Masters is in residence at The Motor City Dance Factory in Southfield, Michigan, a Northwestern suburb of Detroit. Michael's work is significant because he is teaching Jit to young African American female dancers, a population currently missing from Jit culture.

Jit Masters “want[s] people to recognize Jit—everywhere. In school systems and what not. For them to be *even* introduced to it, more than just, ok, it was on *So You Think You Can Dance*. Beyond that, how do we get Jit into your face all the time? We gotta hit it on multiple fronts.” Jit Masters teach weekly classes through a nine-month course, culminating with a traditional recital performance, where the Jit is performed alongside contemporary, tap, West African, jazz, ballet, hip hop, and other styles of dance.

During a conversation I had with Michael, we discussed the problematic nature of taking Jit out of its cultural context to teach it in the traditional dance studio setting. He admits “there is a lot of controversy with me doing what I am doing.” Michael explains that he received a fair amount of criticism when Jit Masters was created. He says, “When I first started with Jit Masters I had been out of the game for so long. I mean, the name itself, Jit Masters. And everyone was like, who is this guy? Who is calling themselves the

‘master of Jit?’ They didn’t remember me and that I had been out of the game for so long. And he’s teaching in a studio. You know, this is *not* where Jit is taught.” I respond, “And in Southfield,” he replies, “that’s right, in Southfield. So, the backlash was there. A lot of the same people that were giving me the backlash are the same people that are supporting me today.”

Michael continues to explain how he approaches meeting the young dancers at their level of musical acumen, maturity, and technique. He says:

the things that kids didn’t understand [about Jit culture] is what they call “computer music” that we dance to. We dance to techno in Jit, ghettotech, and some house music sometimes. So, the kids didn’t understand that. I had to take the opportunity to meet them at their level, I had to use their music. I had to incorporate their [hip hop] dances, like the Nae Nae, and the Whip so they could at least meet me halfway. Once I got them halfway and they were at least able to try it. Because, when they started to like it and I started really letting them hear the techno they started to want that.

He explains the measures he takes in the studio setting to replicate how most people learn Jit in Detroit.

In the end, even though it’s in a structured studio setting, I try my best to emulate what we do in the street. What we did in the basement. So, I pin dancers against each other. We do battles, we do circles, we do jam sessions. We don’t just do choreography in here. They learn what it takes to be able to go up against the next person. I have had young girls crying in class because they had to battle, and they weren’t as good as the next person. They wanted to be better when they came back. And yeah, it’s like, you don’t want them to cry but that was how we felt back then.

Asking Michael how the parents of the children handled that situation, he explains that they understood the premise behind his intention and took it well. In order for a Jitter to battle, one must be skilled in improvisation techniques, which can be in opposition to traditional studio pedagogical models. He teaches the groundwork and the musicality of

the Jit but advocates that his students create their own movement based off this foundation. He notes:

you gotta create something on the spot and make it your own. I have been doing that for the last couple of years. Trying to emulate that, trying to stay as true as I can to the culture. I had a couple of girls do the J Dilla performance, it was a J Dilla youth day. It was amazing, I had a great feeling just because of the fact that I was able to have them go out and I didn't give them any choreography. I said we have a show; the show is next week. This is how much time we have, and they were able to do that. They were able to go out there and perform the Jit and just go out there and do their thing.

Jit Masters is also notable for teaching studio-trained dancers. Michael explains that teaching studio dancers are "his favorite" because he enjoys having to thoroughly deconstruct the form and structure to teach it from the ground up. He says:

because in tap you are like low to the ground, like in hip hop, and you have ballet dancers and their postures are all up here. You have to have a different form. It's similar to tap but even further different. So, I have to break them apart so that they are not so up here. And they bring everything, their gravity, down to the ground. Once they get that then they are used to kicking a certain way, their battements, their tendus, they are doing all of this stuff that is traditional and I have to break that. You have to lean this way, it's not gonna feel "right," but it's right. So, I have fun doing that. Then seeing them being able to distinguish, as they go along and break apart back and forth. Even hip hop dancers that do strictly hip hop, they dissect every move but it is usually a lot slower. Even when it's fast and pumped up, compared to what we do, it's slow. So, Jit, for some of them, seems like extra work. I'm really good at this hip hop thing that I do, I know you are good, actually you are great, but now we have to break you apart for this. You have to be in control but move fast at the same time, in a different way.

Finally, Jit Masters is unique for specifically training young female Jitters. By this, Michael is complicating the gendered narrative of Jit at the same time as he is empowering young girls by teaching them the same way he was taught in the streets, clubs, and basements of Detroit. During the summer of 2018, Jit Masters auditioned for the television program *America's Got Talent*, which showcased mostly young females

performing choreography and their own freestyle of the Jit. At the time of this writing, they are waiting for the results of their audition.

Mike Manson

Mike Manson's mission as a dancer and teaching artist is to cultivate local and international awareness and esteem for Detroit Jit by promoting dance competitions, performance opportunities, and through offering master classes, helping to ensure that the culture of Jit will continue to thrive within the city of Detroit, and beyond. Mike explains his teaching philosophy during an interview: "you gotta understand, I don't teach people for people to be a student all the time, or to stay a student. I teach people because I want them to be greater than me, believe it or not." He continues, "I feel like my success is gonna come with age. Because the older I get, the more enlightened or open I get. I'm woke, as they say now. I don't want to be called an old legend or an OG because in dance we are always students."

Over the past ten-plus years, I have been the artistic director and guest artist in residence for Centro Artistico Pereyra (CAP) in La Paz, Bolivia, setting choreographic works and teaching technique classes for members of the school's dance company. I trained extensively with Mike during my fieldwork, and was impressed by his teaching philosophy, methods of teaching technique, and his incredible skill for Jitting. I convinced the director of CAP to invite Mike to Bolivia as an international guest artist. Mike and I traveled to La Paz in October 2018 to teach Jit and hip hop master classes to CAP students and professional dancers.

Unlike the extended amount of the time Michael Smith has to work with his students (weekly for nine months), Mike Manson only had three weeks to teach Jit and hip hop master classes and to set a performance piece, based on choreography he taught in the workshops. I assisted Mike during all of his workshops. After the first full day, it was apparent that the Jit was too difficult and fast for the younger students to grasp. Accordingly, we modified the workshop, switching to hip hop technique with a much slower tempo. Instead of teaching shuffles to fast techno, Mike taught hip hop choreography, focusing less on footwork and more on upper body isolations, and hip and arm movements performed to the songs “Touch It” by Busta Rhymes and “Poison” by Bel Biv Devoe. Many of the younger students had previous training in hip hop so they grasped Mike’s hip hop style with much more ease and confidence than the Jit.

Mike also instructed a group of adult male professional dancers who were mostly trained in ballet, contemporary, and jazz, with one dancer being only trained in various hip hop styles. I also danced in all of the workshops with the men and was surprised at how difficult Jit technique was for them to catch, as well. Even though there was a language barrier, Mike used various corporeal cues to transmit the particulars of the Jit style. However, it seems verbal language was not the actual barrier for the transmission of the Jit, it was something else. It was not so much the steps that the Bolivian dancers grappled with, either, but more so the “Jit swag:” hunched shoulders, balled fists, perfectly in sync with the driving electro beat while giving more attention to the space *between* the steps, rather than the steps themselves, with the impossible task of your footwork and upper body being in control while simultaneously letting go, at the same

time effortlessly gliding across the floor on metaphorical ice skates. The Jit is not a dance you can gain fluency in through just six or seven workshops, even for studio-trained dancers, as I myself learned during my months of fieldwork in Detroit.

For the final performance, I Jitted with Mike and the cast of men to a Detroit techno song and even though they did a remarkable job in such a short amount of time, their performance did not *look* or *feel* like the Jit. Because many of the dancers were previously exposed to jazz and hip hop, they gave their version of Jit more of a hip hop look by punctuating beats in the music with small, sharp upper body movements of the shoulders and the chest; the polished but assertive feeling of Jit was not there. The ramifications of dancing to Detroit techno in Bolivia must be considered, too. Because techno sounds like it is being transmitted from a funkified planet beyond Mars, somewhere from the future, the space-age, mechanical driven beats contain a different type of “soul” than hip hop, or than reggaetón,⁴² which is what many of the dancers in Bolivia listen and dance to. Between the sounds and movements, the feeling of the Jit was lost in translation. Other than Mike performing his improvisational Jit solos on stage, the Jit in Bolivia was somehow not the *Jit*. In this instance, did the Jit become something *else* in Bolivia or is this an effect similar to hip hop’s global dissemination?

After our final performance, a former female company member who had performed in many of my choreographic works approached me and said, “Now I *finally* understand the way your body moves.” With a confused look on my face, I asked her to

⁴² Reggaetón was born in Puerto Rico in the 1990s and the sound is a fusion of hip hop, reggae, and other local genres from the Caribbean.

explain. After seeing Mike's solo performance of the Jit, all of the pieces came together for her. She sensed a glimpse of "Detroit" in the way both Mike and I move. I clarified that when I had worked with her in the past on choreographed projects, I had no embodied knowledge of the Jit and that I wasn't exactly from Detroit but a suburb in close proximity to the city. Further, my beginner level of Jitting is nowhere near Mike's expert level. She persisted, explaining that what she observed was not due to the actual steps of the Jit, but more of a movement quality, or what she described in Spanish as *siento* (a feeling). The commonality she saw between our movement styles was something she detected when I first began dancing with her, a style/feeling she had no means to previously contextualize or anchor an explanation to. The *siento* she received was difficult to put into verbal discourse—a sensation that offered her a better understanding of Detroit culture and the way people move through the city. However, when I studied with Mike in Detroit and Bolivia, I saw little commonality between our movement styles, even though I was working diligently to understand what the style was and how to embody it. In other words, I see something very different from what she perceived, more of a replication of his style than a genuine commonality between us.

The Future of the Jit: "Authenticity" or Preservation?

For Jit Masters, Michael attempting to teach the younger dancers through a likeness of how he learned in the streets points to issues of taking a dance form out of its cultural context. It could be said that a certain type of "authenticity" is lost by taking the Jit into the dance studio, even with Michael taking important measures to prevent this occurrence. However, many of my participants expressed fears that the Jit is dying and

could become irrelevant in the next decade or even sooner, so in that sense Jit Masters could also be seen as helping to preserve the dance form. Here, the question can be asked, what is more important for the Jit, authenticity or preservation? Putting the complications of the term authenticity aside, a ramification of the Jit remaining authentic (looking and feeling like the Jit) is that it could die in the underground. Conversely, by modifying its foundation and music to relate to the attitudes and tastes of future generations (e.g., Jit music with the Migos rapping), the Jit could essentially preserve itself. With these examples, there is give and take, having consequences on both sides. This quandary is similar to Mike's experience of teaching the Jit in Bolivia. The Jit gained a new audience and awareness of its existence, however, as a consequence, the essence of the Jit was lost in the classroom of the dance studio. However, how Mike's performance will continue to inspire or resonate with the dancers is unknown.

Both Jit Masters and Mike Manson are continuing to advance the Jit culture while challenging issues and narratives that have long been associated to the Jit, such as the lack of female Jitters and the Jit not being able to get out of Detroit. These examples demonstrate the benefits and risks of taking the Jit to the Southern Hemisphere, or even just a few miles away to the suburb of Southfield—while something is gained, something is lost simultaneously. These instances reveal a complex relationship occurring between the stability and diffusion of cultural production, as well as issues on authenticity and preservation, questions for which at this stage of my research, I do not have easy answers.

Future Research

The initiative of Jit Masters teaching mostly young female dancers in a suburb of Detroit opens up the possibility of future research on female Jitters. I am cognizant that there is a whole project to be done on women Jitters, something that was not possible in this dissertation. For example, Queen Gabby, who is known as the most accomplished Jitter of this current generation, has moved to Los Angeles to bring awareness of Jit culture to the West Coast. Thus, a female taking the Jit to various dance studios in Los Angeles adds another level of complexity to questions on taking the Jit outside of Detroit. The implications of learning the Jit in the streets of Detroit versus the dance studio, whether in Los Angeles or Southfield, is another topic worthy of further investigation, particularly the consequences of taking the Jit out of its cultural context, even with the best intentions to preserve and disseminate the cultural knowledge of the dance form.

Many of my participants mentioned Chicago footwork/juke either briefly or in great detail in relation to Detroit Jit culture or the dance form, a topic that I did not have the space to address in this dissertation. There is a historical rivalry and contentious nature between Detroit Jit and Chicago footwork/juke. Many Jitters I interviewed made a point to emphasize that even though the Jit is a form of footwork it should not be confused or conflated with Chicago footwork. Nonetheless, the parallels and differences between these two dance forms—separated by 282 miles, yet connected by the I-94 corridor—deserve further investigation.

In Bolivia, the conversation I had with the former dance company member sparked an interest in investigating the Jit as a technique for corporeally depicting

Detroit's culture, applicable to Marcel Mauss' *Techniques of the Body* (1973). Through the theory of "habitus," which attributes bodily habits and patterns to cultural processes, Mauss argues each action has a learned component that is shaped by geographic location and cultural practices. Because he saw culture's legibility in the specific actions performed by bodies, Mauss examines the body's readable codes as they reveal details that are indicative of a specific geographic location or culture. Future research could consider Mauss' theoretical contribution of habitus as an important framework for considering the body as a reflection of Detroit.

One final idea for a future project transposes knowledge from my dissertation into a critical documentary on the Jit, as expressed and performed by prominent dancers and electronic music producers/DJs within Detroit's Jit culture. The film could serve as a visual companion to this dissertation by centering on the connections between the Jit and hip hop, shaped by the questions and realizations presented in this chapter. As Jit culture is visual, performative, and sensorial, presenting this story through a critical documentary provides another means to get closer to the essence of this underground—mechanized—abstruse—raw—Detroit—feeling: a corporeal embodiment of the streets. D. Soyini Madison's idea of critical ethnography as a generative meeting of two sides that make a difference in each other's worlds would be a key influence on this project (2012, 10). During my last few months of fieldwork in Detroit, I concluded that the Jit not only belongs on the written page, but also documented on film, as many dancers in the culture want the story of the Jit to be told. Even though I consider this dissertation a collaboration with the Jit community, I was the conduit for writing the body into the

page. With a documentary, the Jit can be expressed through the voices/dancing bodies of the culture in Detroit. Further, transposing the findings of this dissertation into a documentary might offer the Jit community a broader reach of accessibility and recognition than my dissertation can provide. Like a critical ethnography, a critical documentary could combine the shared experiences and embodied knowledges of both the observer (me) and observed (the Jit culture). Additionally, the documentary could serve as a source of self-representation for the Jit community.

With the hyper-connected world of today, few cultural practices can remain under the radar and hold on to their sub-culture ethos like the Jit. It is understandable why there are some dancers in the culture who want the Jit to remain preserved in Detroit and still others who want it to travel and become a global phenomenon. The main goal of my future research is to help bring awareness of the dance form and the Jit community to academia and beyond, by bringing the Jitters from Detroit front and center. Putting Jit in conversation with hip hop studies is one way to bring increased attention to the form. And yet, even though the history and details of Detroit Jit are in some ways parallel to hip hop, the Jit deserves to be recognized on its own merit of innovation and skill. Placing the embodied knowledge and voices of the Jit community in the forefront, this other American story of Detroit's Jit hop can be told.

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APPENDIX A

Participant Interviews

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

Name	Date	Location
Tristan Hackney	3/16/2018	Tristan's home
Haleem Rasul	3/21/2018	Cass Corridor Community Center
Michael Smith	03/22/2018	Motor City Dance Factory
Eryk Christian	03/25/2018	Minneapolis, MN via FaceTime
Gabby Smith	04/06/2018	Gabby's home
Johnny and Tracey McGhee	04/12/2018	Denny's Restaurant, Taylor, MI
Kenya Sutton	04/24/2018	Coffee house in Warren, MI
Mike Manson	04/26/2018	Coffee house in Detroit, MI
Lily Karunanayake	05/09/2018	Coffee house in Detroit, MI
Reggie Turner	05/23/2018	Coffee house in Detroit, MI
James Broxton	05/24/2018	Coffee house in Detroit, MI
Eric Broadnax	05/31/2018	Campus Martius, Downtown Detroit, MI
Willie Hull	08/14/2018	Capitol Park, Downtown Detroit, MI
John Nance	08/17/2018	Drive Bar, Downtown, Detroit, MI
Johnny McGhee	09/01/2018	The Detroit Institute of Arts
Ronald Ford	01/02/2019	Cass Corridor Community Center

APPENDIX B

IRB Approval Letter



Institutional Review Board
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
P.O. Box 425619, Denton, TX 76204-5619
940-898-3378
email: IRB@twu.edu
<http://www.twu.edu/irb.html>

DATE: June 26, 2017

TO: Ms. Melanie Van Allen
Dance

FROM: Institutional Review Board (IRB) - Denton

Re: Approval for The Jit: Dancing Postindustrial Detroit (Protocol #: 19574)

The above referenced study has been reviewed and approved by the Denton IRB (operating under FWA00000178) on 6/23/2017 using an expedited review procedure. This approval is valid for one year and expires on 6/23/2018. The IRB will send an email notification 45 days prior to the expiration date with instructions to extend or close the study. It is your responsibility to request an extension for the study if it is not yet complete, to close the protocol file when the study is complete, and to make certain that the study is not conducted beyond the expiration date.

If applicable, agency approval letters must be submitted to the IRB upon receipt prior to any data collection at that agency. A copy of the approved consent form with the IRB approval stamp is enclosed. Please use the consent form with the most recent approval date stamp when obtaining consent from your participants. A copy of the signed consent forms must be submitted with the request to close the study file at the completion of the study.

Any modifications to this study must be submitted for review to the IRB using the Modification Request Form. Additionally, the IRB must be notified immediately of any adverse events or unanticipated problems. All forms are located on the IRB website. If you have any questions, please contact the TWU IRB.

cc. Dr. Mary Williford-Shade, Dance
Dr. Rosemary Candelario, Dance
Graduate School

APPENDIX C

IRB Extension Letter



Institutional Review Board

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs
P.O. Box 425619, Denton, TX 76204-5619
940-898-3378
email: IRB@twu.edu
<https://www.twu.edu/institutional-review-board-irb/>

DATE: May 31, 2018

TO: Ms. Melanie Van Allen
Dance

FROM: Institutional Review Board (IRB) - Denton

Re: Extension for The Jit: Dancing Postindustrial Detroit (Protocol #: 19574)

The request for an extension of your IRB approval for the above referenced study has been reviewed by the TWU IRB (operating under FWA00000178) and appears to meet our requirements for the protection of individuals' rights.

If applicable, agency approval letters must be submitted to the IRB upon receipt prior to any data collection at that agency. If subject recruitment is on-going, a copy of the approved consent form with the IRB approval stamp is enclosed. Please use the consent form with the most recent approval date stamp when obtaining consent from your participants. A copy of the signed consent forms must be submitted with the request to close the study file at the completion of the study.

This extension is valid one year from June 23, 2018. Any modifications to this study must be submitted for review to the IRB using the Modification Request Form. Additionally, the IRB must be notified immediately of any unanticipated incidents. All forms are located on the IRB website. If you have any questions, please contact the TWU IRB.

cc. Dr. Mary Williford-Shade, Dance
Dr. Rosemary Candelario, Dance
Graduate School