# Loose Taps:

# Finding Queer Orientations in Tap Dance Performance

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## Introduction

The Eighth Annual Stockholm Tap Festival was finishing up, and its closing party found students, teachers, performers, audience members, family, and friends all celebrating in a cozy dance studio. It was my first time at the festival, and the party's small, open floor allowed for conversation between anyone, regardless of their status in the tap dance world. I ended up speaking with a graduate student researching Brenda Bufalino, a dancer well-known for her resistance to the gender stereotypes often imposed on women in tap dance. Thinking of other marginalized identities, I asked her if she knew of any queer hoofers. We both couldn't answer my question, which was a slight surprise. The contemporary tap dance community is incredibly inclusive, with conscious efforts constantly made to honor every dancer, major or minor, who has shaped the art form. For example, one class at the festival ended with each student being asked to name an influential tapper. With such an all-encompassing tradition, there are bound to be non-heterosexual tap dancers who are "out," or tap choreography that has engaged with queer themes. Who are these hoofers? How has tap dance been "unstraightened," if at all? Where is queer tap dance?

This gap in tap dance history isn't for a lack of the genre's exposure. Tap is finding expression all over American media and, consequently, global culture, from *So You Think You Can Dance* to *Newsies*. The form is seen in viral YouTube videos, on late night talk shows, and on concert stages. Tap's style and versatility allow for its adaptation into multiple settings, and it continues to find an ever-growing audience across the globe – the aforementioned Stockholm Tap Festival, for example, brought together dancers from at least three continents.

Within dance scholarship, the discourse surrounding tap dance is growing steadily and presents challenges unique to the dance style. As Deborah Jowitt asserts, writing about "the famously evanescent art of dance" presents unique challenges that other scholars of the performing arts do not face (31). But for tap dance, writers must not only contend with visual and kinesthetic ephemerality, but also the audible musicality that tap dance embodies, which complicates how it can be received and interpreted. "How tap dance achieves meaning is still open to great debate," dance scholar Thomas D. Defrantz writes, referring to the persistent difficulty in separating style, movement, and musicality in tap dance ("Being Savion Glover" 3). Tap historiography is similarly difficult, due to its resistance to codification, its oral lineages, and its status as a relatively young dance form. Furthermore, as historian Constance Valis Hill writes, tap dancers and scholars often must grapple with a mainstream dance history that continually favored "European traditions over improvisational African American forms" (331). Nevertheless, tap historians have produced large bodies of work that trace the influence and continuities from African slaves and Irish immigrants in pre-industrial times to the contemporary hoofers of today. Scholars like Hill, DeFrantz, Jacquie Malone, and many others have worked to affirm the multiplicity of tap's history along considerations of race, gender, and class.

This thesis intends to explore tap dance along another, seemingly forgotten axis of identity – sexual and romantic orientation. This subject has been broached before in dance studies, particularly in regards to modern dance and ballet (Desmond). Yet, a dearth exists in tap dance studies on this topic, with references to homosexuality few and far between. In her 2010 book, *Tap Dancing America*, Hill briefly mentioned discrimination based on orientation within the hoofer community. Tap dance, Hill writes, is "imbued with sexism and homophobia," with

same-sex pairings either read as friends or siblings (358). DeFrantz has also brought attention to this issue. In his article "Blacking Queer Dance," he calls for tap dance to be "conceived as a gay male prerogative and not a hypermasculine alternative to ballet" (105). The strands of white heteromasculinity, authority, and authenticity in tap dance appear rigidly aligned, with scant academic work done to jostle this configuration. By analyzing a range of tap choreography examples, I hope to uncover instances where this alignment is unsettled, or *can* be unsettled. In doing so, I hope to loosen up tap's relationship to straight orientations and open up the floor to further research into this line of inquiry.

My earlier question – where is queer tap dance? – is complicated by the nature of studying sexuality in the performing arts. The seminal collection *Dancing Desires*, edited by Jane Desmond, reflected a similar intent to "cross-pollinate [the] twin axes of intellectual work" done in dance studies and queer studies (14). Drawing on the work of philosopher Judith Butler, Desmond writes that "kinesthetic renderings" inflected by race, age, class, and other subcultural norms can allow for sexualities to be "inscribed, learned, rendered, and continually resignified through bodily actions" (6 - 7). Furthermore, jazz historian Sherrie Tucker, cautions against settling for a "Where's Waldo" exercise when queering an art form's history. That is, she argues against employing a "historically informed 'gaydar' that fails to interrogate the historicity of straightness" and the modern condition of the "closet." Tucker aims for something more than just "spotting" queer subjects, which simply reinforces their exception to a norm. Tucker elaborates on this resistance in the following passage:

> I am not arguing that "straightness" eclipse "queerness" as a sex-object-of-study in jazz studies – but that we refuse to divide jazz into queer moments and straight moments, queer bodies and straight bodies, queer sound and straight sound – and see analytic approaches that help us look at queering and straightening as relational, directional [...] historically entwined, and intersected with race, gender, class, modernity, nation, and other discourses, social categories, and fields of power. Jazz studies needs to know more about how jazz becomes a sign for heterosexuality [...] and it needs to queer straightness, to see it as "perplexing," in order to see it at all. (Tucker)

Desmond echoes this sentiment when she writes that homophobia has been the "dark background" that aids in constituting "the 'canon' of dance history" (4). For this thesis, I similarly employ this ambivalent analytical mode for tap dance. In my examples, I examine moments that simultaneously reinforce straight normativity while also "queering" tap performance, and these moments are by no means mutually exclusive. By doing so, I hope to collapse preconceptions of tap dance as heterosexual and move towards an articulation of nascent tap queerness.

The question "where is queer tap dance?" requires another, more specific one: what does "queer" even mean? Desmond follows queer theorist Michael Warner in defining it as "all that is not heteronormative," a practice that anyone, "gay" or not, can initiate (11). Irish step dancer and queer dance scholar Nic Gareiss defined queer as "mobilization of resistance to the normative" in a personal interview. He similarly considers it a non-essentialist category where one does not have to strictly identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or otherwise in order to be "queer." Sara Ahmed's open-ended definition of the term appears to encompass both of these definitions. She draws upon the term's etymological origins as an adjective for the oblique, bent, or "just plain wonky," and claims the word for "non-straight sexual practices [as] a form of social and sexual

contact" (Ahmed 565). In describing queer *orientations,* for Ahmed it is not the "'object choice' that makes the difference, [...] but the difference it makes in terms of subject-formation and world-making to turn one way and not another" (Tucker). In other words, queer orientations are *turnings* towards alternate alignments of social and sexual practices that open up new lines of potential – of "what we can do, where we can go, how we are perceived, and so on" (Ahmed 563). Thus, in my search for a queerness in tap dance, I aim to identify these alternate, looser alignments that resist and respond to "straight" configurations.

A pursuit for these ambivalent moments in tap dance requires a strategy for finding them. I follow Jack Halberstam, whose book *The Queer Art of Failure* produces a useful methodology for uncovering queer phenomena in popular culture. Halberstam uses low theory, a concept borrowed from cultural theorist Stuart Hall, which for Halberstam involves scavenging across "eccentric texts and examples," in order to deny "the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory," that is, the codified, "authoritative" theoretical frameworks of academia (Halberstam 16). As mentioned earlier, tap dance history lacks codification and often faces neglect as an African-American dance form. In its resistance to racist and elitist systems of oppression, the mutable styles and oral traditions of tap dance itself can be considered "low theory." For this thesis, I examine dances that eschew respectable or authoritative ideas of tap, and thus attempt to find eccentricity within an already eccentric form. I'll be examining tap dance in dresses, bedazzled vests, and chain-mail; tap dance performed without tap shoes; and tap dance done in dim margins and blackouts.

This thesis is divided into two sections, with an intermission in between. The first act, to expand on this theatrical analogy, explores the mobilization of male crossdressing in order to

approach Ahmed's loose orientations, while the second act looks at dances that exaggerate spectacle and sound to meander towards the same ends. Two examples, *Billy Elliot the Musical*'s "Expressing Yourself" and "Turn it Off" from *The Book of Mormon*, are drawn from Broadway – a genre whose tap dances are sometimes seen as frivolous or low-brow by serious hoofers. I put these alongside examples from choreographers active in the concert tap world: Caleb Teicher's *Not So Impossible* and Josh Hilberman's *The Warrior*. My brief intermission concerns a Lindy Hop duet by Teicher and swing dancer Nathan Bugh, which serves to consider questions of performance, masculinity, and orientation in a parallel jazz dance form. My hope is that through these wonky, off-kilter performances, possible conceptions of tap dance's potential for queer resistance may be seen *and* heard.

**Boys in Dresses**

Images of tap dancers in popular culture take myriad forms, but the most salient are ones that adhere to gender binary norms. Picture a famous tap dancer. You might imagine an elegant man dressed in tails, top hat, and cane. Or, perhaps a woman in high heels, fishnets, and a flowing mid-length dress. If you're thinking more recently, you may picture a man in baggy pants, dreadlocks free, hitting out complex rhythms on his taps. Three imagined hoofers, loosely based on Fred Astaire, Eleanor Powell, and Savion Glover respectively, all embody an outward presentation that matches with their perceived sex.[1] Their high visibility in popular culture tacitly reiterates "straight" configurations of sex, gender, and sexual orientation. In this section, I analyze two performances that unsettle these rigidities via the image of the tap dancing boy in the dress: "Expressing Yourself" and *Not So Impossible*.

I turn to Ahmed for theoretical frameworks in which to analyze tap-danced crossdressing. Male heteronormativity, Ahmed writes, works to "alig[n] sex (the male body) and gender (the masculine character) with sexual orientation (the heterosexual future)," and "any nonalignment produces a queer effect" (556). Sherrie Tucker has framed transvestite performances in jazz history as "straightening devices" that employ gender fluidity alongside heteronormativity to enforce straight alignments. Tucker argues that determining the sexual orientations of drag performers is not necessary – "rather, we might want to look at how their performances operated in relation to the straight lines of their times and places." And citing Butler, Desmond writes that any performance of "social identities [...] communicated in relation to extant meaning systems"

[1] Arguably the most visible tapper in our current decade is Michelle Dorrance, who presents what Nic Gareiss called, in our interview, an "urban, tomboy-ish femininity." Astaire, Powell, and Glover were chosen largely due to their frequent and influential appearances in cinema and on television, which spread their likenesses to a much larger demographic.

allows for "change through misperformance" (12).[2] Thus, for this section I look at crossdressing in tap dance in regards to how it straightens and queers tap's configurations of sex, gender, and orientation.

Several female tap dancers across history have utilized crossdressing for various historically specific reasons. Alberta Whitman, for example, wore suits in order to be a "male" partner for her sisters' vaudeville act. Decades later, Eleanor Powell and Judy Garland would wear tuxedo-style outfits, in order to "flashily show off [their] long shapely legs" for a presumed straight, male audience (Hill 253). Morrison writes that these early subversions were constructed via "binary opposition to representations of male dancers" ("Juanita Pitts" 20). In contrast, women like Juanita Pitts and Brenda Bufalino utilized crossdressing to redirect objectifying gazes. Pitts, a black hoofer active in the 1930s, and Bufalino, a white dancer in the 1980s, both wore light-colored suits that directed gazes away from their legs and allowed them to be received more seriously. These "misperformances" of the male tuxedo embodied the transcendence of female rhythm tap artistry above demeaning feminine stereotypes. However, the opposite is rarely seen – male tappers dancing in dresses. What happens when this occurs? An emphasis of artistry, analogous to that of Bufalino and Pitts, or something else? My first example comes from the Broadway stage, and its title hints at one possible answer – "Expressing Yourself."

Set in a 1984 British mining town, *Billy Elliot the Musical* (2008) follows young Billy Elliot as he discovers a passion for ballet. While ballet features heavily in the show, tap dance plays a pivotal role in portraying Billy's story, appearing in three significant moments. The first of these is the song and dance number "Expressing Yourself," or "Express" for short. Ostensibly

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[2] In this respect, Ahmed's approach to orientation via "phenomenological emphasis [on] the lived experience of inhabiting a body" is perhaps even more fitting for tap dance than jazz (544).

a duet number performed by Billy and his best friend, Michael, "Express" employs the most traditionally Broadway-style tap of the musical. In original productions of *Billy Elliot*, "Express" itself consists of roughly three parts: a sung duet as Michael introduces Billy to the fun of cross-dressing, a tap dance section, and a flashy finale where Michael's outfits become an ensemble of larger-than-life "dancing dresses." As the first instance of tap in *Billy Elliot*, "Expressing Yourself" plays an important part in establishing the role of tap in Billy's narrative – particularly in defining "acceptable" levels of queerness in dance.

The majority of the tapping in "Express" occurs after an initial comedic song section. After changing into tap shoes, Michael leads Billy into the dance with a stomp on the pickup beat, before moving into a series of fluid step-flaps. This opening combination is essentially a sped up soft-shoe essence – step flap front, step flap back – a move very common in turn-of-the-century "class acts." Emerging at the turn of the century, the class act allowed black vaudeville dancers to challenge racial stereotypes through their refined mannerisms, impeccable tuxedos, and technical prowess (Hill 42). Duos like Honi Coles and Charles Atkins frequently danced the soft shoe, impressing audiences with "elegant dress, aural precision, a detached coolness in performance, and flawless execution" (Hill 163). Technical precision was key in "Express," and much attention was given in rehearsals to the clarity of both rhythm and bodily shapes.

The music reflects this throwback to the class act era, diving into sparse stop-time, with brass and drums punctuating the start of each bar. Later, the score even incorporates jangly, slightly silly banjo. This musical callback to vaudevillian performance is compounded by Billy and Michael's playful, comedic attitudes and crisp, clean bodily rhythms and shapes. In my own

performance experience with this number, “Express” served as a lighthearted number midway through the grueling first act, and honest moments like inside jokes or funny faces between the actors playing Billy and Michael were encouraged by the choreographers. These multiple citations of authenticity in “Express” – vaudevillian allusions, clear tap rhythms, and a relaxed demeanor between performers – serve to reinforce the song’s repeated question: “What the hell is wrong with expressing yourself?”

The allusions in “Expressing Yourself” towards the elegantly dressed class acts in particular allows for a specific articulation of resistant authenticity. Michael takes the class acts’ clothing-based resistance against black stereotypes - the elegance of tuxedos and the top hats - and substitutes in skirts and dresses to resist stereotypes of gender and affirm his individual choice. While Billy resists donning Michael’s proffered outfits, he eventually comes to enjoy the imaginative world Michael conjures. And in performance, the skirts and dresses of “Express” served as props and aids for myself and other Billys that allowed us to let loose with our fellow Michael. The authentic enjoyment of crossdressing in “Express,” in addition to its citations of the class act, aids in normalizing the image of Billy and Michael in dresses.

This misperformance of the class act allows for Ahmed’s misaligned orientation of sex-gender-orientation, but this queering effect is complicated by the musical’s paradoxical stance on homosexuality. Theatre scholar Helen Freshwater outlines these contradictions in the following quote:

> [*Billy Elliot the Musical*] has a fraught relationship with gay politics. As in the film, its inclusion of Michael puts a sympathetic portrait of queer childhood into the mainstream, and yet its repeated insistence that Billy is not “a pouf” (as he puts it) and that there is nothing effeminate about dancing, suggests the

> compromises that had to be made in order to get this portrait up on screen and stage. [It] calls for greater tolerance for difference, but at the cost of uncoupling creativity from homosexuality. In the world of the show, Billy's dancing is legitimated by his asexuality. (Freshwater 166).

"Express" serves to contain "effeminate dancing," firmly establishing this vaudevillian style of tap as Michael's domain of dance expression. Thereafter, tap dance is either associated with masculine aggression, as in the Act One finale "Angry Dance," or with neutered collectivity in the "Finale." Furthermore, a small detail in costuming hints at Billy's asexualized status. Unlike Michael, whose legs are bare under the dress, Billy dons his skirt *over* his pants, denying any possibility of a sexual gaze upon his legs from Michael – not unlike the intents of Bufalino and Pitts in redirecting the hetero-masculine gaze. Thus, crossdressing in *Billy Elliot the Musical* simultaneously "queers" Michael and "straightens" Billy, in Ahmed's sense of the term. Billy's success is predicated within *Billy Elliot* on his childhood asexuality (and future heterosexuality), so the show leaves the queer potential of "Express" stranded in a realm of unfulfillment and failure. Yet, its reformulations of tap dance traditions alongside crossdressing aid in reinforcing authentic queer expression. *Billy Elliot's* disruption of gendered expectations for boys onstage resonates with another tap performance: Caleb Teicher's *Not So Impossible*. Like *Express*, *Not So Impossible* explores crossdressing and danced narrative, but takes a deeper turn into the genderfluid capabilities of tap choreography itself.

Caleb Teicher is an active dancer and choreographer based in New York City. In a personal interview, he outlined his upbringing as a hoofer. While initially trained as a drummer, Teicher discovered tap early in life and excelled at it, eventually becoming a member of Michelle Dorrance's company after dancing with a tour of *West Side Story*. Since then, he has been

actively creating work with his group, Caleb Teicher & Company, intent on "utilizing various American dance traditions [for] reflection upon modern American culture" ("Bio"). *Not So Impossible*, an ensemble piece premiered in 2011, features ten dancers, including Teicher. Set to Sufjan Stevens' twenty-five minute song, "Impossible Soul," *Not So Impossible* explores themes of marginalization and individuality. The program note for it asks, "How do we learn to treat each other better?" (Kourlas). This question is articulated by Teicher and his dancers through multiple layers of performance – in costume and lighting, but most importantly, in rhythm, volume, and kinetics.

The piece begins with an imposing figure, played by David Parker, standing upstage as the ensemble walks onstage into linear formations. When Teicher enters, he is immediately marked as different – the ensemble's four men and four women wear blue and pink shorts, respectively, a binary contrast to Teicher's red and green "watermelon dress," as he called it in our interview. As the ensemble enforces a rigid 4/4 base beat, Teicher tentatively explores triplet rhythms and sixteenth-note riffs in the silences between. Always spinning or sliding, he contrasts against the ensemble's strict facings towards upstage or downstage. Later, they shift into male-female pairs, not unlike a middle school dance. It is here that Parker, playing an imposing gym-teacher figure, throws a pair of blue shorts at Teicher, forcing him to match up with his peers.

In these first couple minutes of *Not So Impossible*, a visual and aural juxtaposition has been established – gender normative clothing and a rigid 4/4 base beat against gender-crossed clothing and dense rhythmic escapes. When Teicher turns and drags his foot around himself, flaring out his dress, he physically rejects the linear orientations of the ensemble by opting for

curves and circularity.[3] By doing so, *Not So Impossible* constructs a performance working along multiple dimensions of meaning. Like the implicit marking of "Express's" queerness in opposition to straight success, Teicher *fails* to successfully adhere to group customs. Halberstam writes that "the queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable [...] It quietly loses" (88). Teicher directly enacts this "quiet losing" of queerness within *Not So Impossible*. He dances almost inaudibly against the claps ringing out from the ensemble, and, when pressured to stick to their 4/4 rhythm, he can't suppress flights of bodily percussive fancy.

Ten minutes into the piece, Teicher executes a solo that extrapolates these flights into an extended sequence of rotation, balance, and rhythmic virtuosity. Backlit by a projected field of stars, he walks through the darkness into a pool of light downstage. He wears a sleeveless black dress, split at its bottom into halves. Face hidden in shadow, he becomes an island of opacity within the solitary spotlight, with the only discernible parts of his body his arms and lower legs. A small scuff of the foot propels him into a muttering triplet phrase, staggering backwards and forwards – a phrase he returns to intermittently, like a nervous habit. He envelops the space around him, the visual strokes of his arms indicating suspended leaps, toe-balances, and pencil spins. His momentum often lets his dress billow outwards, the two lobes of its fabric multiplying the frenzy of his arms and shadows.

I term this section an example of "anti-flash" tap dance, on account of a strange parallel to an older style of tap dance. Near its start, Teicher turns a huge slide of the toe into a flying over-the-top step. His use of this air step here is intriguing, given its connotations in tap dance

[3] "Orientations" here being used in the literal, spatial sense of the word – where they are facing.

history. Popularized in the 1920s, the over-the-top consists of "springing up [and] bringing each leg [...] around from the back and across to the front of the other leg" (Hill 48).[4] It is a step usually seen in "flash" sections that often ended tap dance numbers in the early 20th century. "Flash is designed to show off the performers power and incite excitement and applause," Morrison writes, "as the body pushes the limits of human potential in tap and jazz dance" ("Tap and Teeth" 33). For black men, it figured as a way of "showing work," conforming to "mainstream configurations of black male identity" intrinsically linked with labor ("Being Savion Glover" 3). This pressure to conform compelled many historical black hoofers to end numbers with impressive flash sequences. As a white dancer, Teicher's over-the-tops are less rigidly coded with this same connotation. Instead, he inverts his floating over-the-top into anti-flash, gesturing towards an alternate reading of the step before diving into riffs and turns.

In fact, Teicher's recurring spins and turns call to mind another kind of flash – "feminine flash." Discussing Eleanor Powell's performance in *Broadway Melody of 1936*, Morrison describes the hoofer's final sequence of *pirouettes a la seconde* into impossibly fast *chainé* turns as an example of feminine flash, borrowing the term from fellow tap scholar Ann Kilkelly ("Tap and Teeth" 33). In Powell's case, the femininity associated with ballet is transmuted into virtuosity with the duration and speed of her turns. Teicher's use of the tap dance turn thus becomes another layer of gender transgression. By using a form of flash that has been associated with femininity, he kinesthetically crossdresses his tapping. The end result is an effective embodiment of the queer experience of self-expression, where failure and marginality literally turn against the straightening norms of society.

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[4] This step, as with most steps in tap dance, has multiple names, and has also been called the "over-the-log."

**A Lindy Hop Intermission**

The crossdressing of *Billy Elliot the Musical* and Caleb Teicher's *Not So Impossible* complicates gender norms in an easily visible way, disrupting "straightened" alignments of the male sex, masculine gender, and heterosexuality via costuming. The reliance on these visible signifiers implies an important question: how can the *sound* of tap itself be queered? Instead of answering this question instantly, I want to take a brief intermission to look at choreography that technically lies outside of the tap dance genre. In doing so, a queerness in jazz-based dance forms might be found in Lindy Hop's fluid relationships to music, physicality, and performance.

In 2016, Caleb Teicher collaborated with swing dancer Nathan Bugh to create the duet work, *Meet Ella*. The dance is ostensibly Lindy Hop danced to various jazz standards sung by Ella Fitzgerald, but encompasses "jitterbug, ballroom, [and] even dashes of Nicholas Brothers virtuosity," all danced to classics like "I Can't Give You Anything But Love" and "Midnight Sun" (Asantewaa). It was first drawn to my attention by a question posed in *New York Times* dance critic Alastair Macaulay's review of the premiere. Highlighting its ample same-sex partnering with supported lifts and turns, Macaulay asked, "are we watching a professional duo (the soft-shoe male duet has a long tradition) or a sexual couple?" It echoed Hill's statement that most same-sex tap dance duos, if not siblings, were assumed to be professional and never romantic (358). What is different about *Meet Ella* that produces this ambiguity?

In one section, the pair starts off center, shaking each other's hand vigorously, as if they both had boundless excitement upon meeting each other. They continue shaking, though, past the length of a typical handshake, and gradually begin moving their handshake up and down to the beat. As Ella's vocals begin, both men begin grooving their hips, prompting approving whoops

and whistles from the audience. They "hand off" this groove between each other, a groove which travels from their hips to Teicher's feet to Bugh's knees, and several limbs in between, all in sync with Fitzgerald's take on the jazz classic. Midway through, they separate, and each gets to solo for a couple bars. Teicher incorporates sprightly kicks and foot ball-changes, while Bugh allows his sinuous hip movements to encompass his entire body at once. These images of "two male bodies in near-constant and joyous proximity" is one that is rarely seen in tap dance, but is commonplace in Lindy (Asantewaa).

*Meet Ella*'s incorporation of tap elements with Lindy Hop allows it to adopt elements of choreography that are relatively rare in tap dance – specifically, contact partnering. Extended physical contact between two male tap dancers is rare. Tap duos like, say, Coles and Atkins, often dance side by side, never holding hands or grabbing each other. With flash steps, male partners would occasionally support each other with flips or split leaps, as the Nicholas Brothers frequently demonstrate, but otherwise, intimate same-sex contact such as that seen in *Meet Ella* is unheard of in tap dance. Ironically, Bugh and Teicher do begin in this clip with a handshake: an established form of "proper" homosocial physical interaction in daily life. It ends up being literally *more* than a handshake, though, as the music's groove takes them into sensual hip grooves and weak-kneed swivels.

Throughout this clip and *Meet Ella* as a whole, the duo has several moments of Lindy Hop partnering. According to Teicher, about "15 minutes" of the 25-minute long piece "[is] in a partnering dance." Later in the clip of "Our Love is Here to Stay," the duo does engage in some recognizable tap dance steps. Lining up together and slyly looking out into the audience, they begin the "Attack Annie": a heavy-footed ball change, spank-step weight change. It's most

well-known to tappers and Lindy dancers as part of the Shim Sham, a 1930s number widely known among both dance communities (Hill 80). This leads into travelling phrases of hops, shuffles, slides, and flaps, done in an understated, near-intoxicated manner with gangly legs and relaxed torsos. The final phrases see Bugh and Teicher becoming more acrobatic, with swung kicks, wing steps, and toe stands executed in tandem.

This latter half of the video clip evokes two tightly-bound mainstays of tap tradition: the class act and the soft shoe. The class act, mentioned earlier in reference to "Express," was created as an avenue of black resistance against demeaning racist stereotypes. Bugh and Teicher's travelling phrases evoke the soft shoe. One of "the oldest and most revered dance form in the tap repertory," the soft shoe was a quintessential tool of class acts since tap's origins (Hill 162). A flexible style, it can convey both comedy and coolness, and is often performed by a duet in tandem.

Bugh and Teicher consciously misperform these re-presentations of these traditions. They ditch tuxedos and top hats for simple black pants and tank tops, and with their fluid, full-bodied movements they signal a departure from buttoned-up respectability. Honi Coles, of the legendary tap dance duo Coles & Atkins, once described their soft-shoe as pure dance, danced by "two straight, stand-up dancers, clean-cut" who "didn't resort to any kind of trickery" (Hill 162). Bugh and Teicher, by letting their soft-shoe wander into realms of flashy steps, juicy movement, and physical contact, choreograph a duet that is less buttoned-up – less "straight," to paraphrase Coles. It suggests a looser presentation of the male duo in tap dance through the capabilities of swing dance.

In my interview with Teicher, he had the following to say on his partnering with Bugh and perceptions of orientation:

> I think, for a lot of people, particularly for *Meet Ella*, they saw me as a follow, for people in the know, and they were like "Oh, that's the gay one." And for people who aren't hip to the ambi-dance culture of swing dance, they're like "Oh, he's in the girl's role, so he must like being a girl, so he must be queer." [...] For whatever reason, tap dance and partner dance is so hetero[sexual], historically, which is so strange, because it feels like fertile ground for exploration of gender and sexuality and different ways of identifying and dancing.

As described by Teicher above, gender and orientation is again constantly straightened along lines of "correct" orientation, where "leads" are associated with masculinity and "follows" are feminine. However, Teicher's belief that tap and partner dance "feel like fertile ground for exploration of gender and sexuality" is echoed in the thriving "ambi-dance culture" he mentions. Many advanced swing dancers freely flow between the lead and follow positions, and sociologist Lisa Wade has examined the potential for social change through these flexible partnering configurations where "patriarchy loses its grip on [dancers'] bodies" (225). Contemporary Lindy Hop is taught in a way that "diminishes differences between men and women" and normalizes the sight of same-sex couples dancing together (237, 233). For men especially, Lindy Hop allows them to "shake off both hypermasculinity and fear of femininity," with male partners adopting many feminine movements and refraining from masculine efforts of brute force (234).

*Meet Ella*'s title draws attention to the dance's *music*, and it is arguably this aspect of Lindy Hop in the Teicher and Bugh's dance that makes room for non-normative perceptions of

gender and sexuality. Wade writes that advanced Lindy Hop dancers, regardless of role, "want to *feel* what the other *hears,*" and they often refer to a triangle of swing dance: yourself, your partner, and the music (242, 243). Teicher and Bugh seem to be opening up this triangle to the audience. In my interview with him, Teicher mentioned that he and Bugh intended to show Lindy from less spectacular angles. "[*Meet Ella*] allows people to have a slightly more abstract way of looking at swing dance," Teicher says, contrasting against the spectacular, "competitive style" usually seen in staged Lindy Hop. By letting Fitzgerald's singing lead them into improper handshakes and casual flash, Teicher and Bugh are allowed to more realistically "shake off hypermasculinity and fear of femininity" as Wade describes. As a same-sex dance duo, this abdication of normative gender conventions can, of course, be read as possibly homosexual, as Macaulay suggested in his review. Yet this ambiguity is inherent to the "abstract" but real approach Bugh and Teicher were going for – audiences can meet Ella in the de-gendered center of Lindy Hop's triangle.

In taking this intermission, I intended to explore an alternate avenue in which *Meet Ella* has left the floor open for queer sexualities to be represented. By portraying swing dance as seen in "real life," Teicher and Bugh capture the immense diversity of lifestyles and identities that populates the Lindy Hop floor. Lindy Hop, like tap, grew up alongside jazz music itself, particularly on stages like the Savoy in the 1920s and 30s (Malone 100). In its deference to the music, *Meet Ella* allows for a brief glimpse into Lindy Hop's transgressive embodied capabilities. Tap dance, as a sister dance form to Lindy Hop, can reveal a similar queer potentiality in its own constant partnership between visuality and musicality.

**Sight and Sound**

In the following section, I examine two works that upend visual spectacle in conjunction with tap's insistent audibility: "Turn It Off!" from the musical *Book of Mormon* and Josh Hilberman's concert dancework, *The Warrior*. At first glance, these examples appear incredibly different. One is a campy ensemble number from a mainstream Broadway musical, seen by hundreds of people every night. The other is a solo experimental work that is a source of long-lasting discussion within the tap dance world. "Turn It Off" was suggested to me by a fellow student; it is arguably the most salient musical theatre number in recent years to explicitly perform "gayness" via tap dance. In contrast, *The Warrior* drew my attention due to its transgressive implications for the entire definition of tap itself. A feature that both share is their emphasis on ambiguity and impropriety beyond visible markers like costuming (though both make clever use of it). Both "Express" and *Not So Impossible* mobilize the sonic capabilities of tap, but how do the two following pieces "queer" tap dance in lieu of crossdressing? Like *Meet Ella* and its focus on music, "Turn it Off" and *The Warrior* gesture towards queerness by foregrounding tap's aural possibilities and moving beyond typical horizons of expectation.

Jack Halberstam's proposal of a queer art centered around darkness serves as a fitting counterpoint to these dance numbers. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam proposes an art style that makes "failure its centerpiece" and situates queerness in "the dark landscape of confusion, loneliness, alienation, impossibility, and awkwardness," where one must adjust to dimness in order to perceive it (97). "The queer artist works with rather than against failure and inhabits the darkness," Halberstam writes, and in his examples these media manifest both literally, e.g. in obscure photographs, but also figuratively – for example, failure as the

"threshold beyond which you cannot see" in Judie Bamber's landscape paintings (96 & 105). Teicher's anti-flash and rhythmic resistance in *Not So Impossible* evoke many of these themes, and *Meet Ella* similarly "fails" to be typical swing dance spectacle. "Turn It Off" and *The Warrior* more closely resemble the latter – they don't directly deal with alienation or confusion, but with failures of other kinds. Putting them into dialogue with Halberstam's aesthetics of queer darkness can highlight how they repurpose failure, impossibility, and awkwardness in tap dance.

*The Book of Mormon* brings us back to the song and drama of the Broadway stage. The 2011 musical written by Trey Park, Matt Stone, and Robert Lopez, follows two fledgling missionaries, Elder Price and Elder Cunningham, as they travel to Uganda. Their difficulty proselytizing in a region they know little about forms the crux of the conflict, and their struggle and subsequent triumph, however roundabout, revolves around themes of "faith and hope and determination" (Brantley). "Turn it Off" occurs soon after the duo arrive and meet the missionaries already present. Theatre scholar Marc Edward Shaw calls the song "a toe-tapping call to bottle up all your fear, mournful grief, and pesky homosexuality" (95). Amidst the squalor of the Ugandan village, and with zero conversions to date, the Mormons exercise a simple way of addressing negative feelings: they simply "turn them off" rather than confronting and resolving them. Two of the Mormons share tragic and depressing issues that they have suppressed, before the song culminates in the group's leader, Elder McKinley, singing about how he has "turned off" his own gay feelings since the fifth grade.

With a musical vamp and a rising repetition of "Turn it Off!", the Mormons then launch into an ensemble tap dance. A hop shuffle ball change kicks off several phrases of clean, two-bar rhythmic phrases, accompanied by gestures of flicking off light switches and pushing away bad

thoughts. In the *New York Times*, Ben Brantley compared it to "the tap orgies of Busby Berkeley," choreographer of several classic 1930s Broadway films like *Forty-second Street*. The dance's initial focus is clearly on the visual spectacle of it. The Mormons' repeated gestures are always in perfect synchronization, with the ensemble's formations and ecstatic smiling expressions clearly visible. Rhythmically, their tap uses a relatively small palette of rolling flaps and flap ball changes to maintain a recurring *one-and-a-two* swung triplet, occasionally syncopated with stomps, scuffs, and drawbacks.

Despite its straightforward, crowd-pleasing nature, "Turn it Off" cleverly uses theatrical lighting techniques in conjunction with tap dance's percussive elements to signify emotional repression. Throughout the sung portion, the lyrical content follows a structure of *verse* (when one of the Elders recount a negative experience), *bridge* (their unbidden reactions and thoughts), and *chorus* ("Turn It Off – like a light switch!"). During each of these verses, the lights noticeably dim during the bridges, reflecting the characters' emotional affect, before ironically brightening once they "turn off" their feelings. Once the tap dancing begins, this dimming is taken to its logical conclusion, with two complete blackouts occurring after synchronized claps. In each blackout, the ensemble's tapped triplets continue to sound out into the house, to the amused surprise of the audience. After the second blackout, the lights go up on the dancing ensemble suddenly wearing hot pink, sparkly vests over their black-and-white Mormon outfits. With a brief singing break, the number shuffles onward, ending in a radiant ending pose.

This intriguing use of complete blackout seems to embody what Shaw calls the "negative capability" of *Book of Mormon*. Originally used by Keats to refer to a kind of artistic ambivalence, negative capability is exemplified here in the musical's uncertain, confusing stance

on the Mormon religion and sexual orientation. "*[E]mpathies* exist alongside *anxieties*" in the *Book of Mormon*, Shaw argues, and contradictions abounds in its celebratory satire of the Latter Day Saints' religion (94). For "Turn it Off" specifically, "the anxiety in the song is personal and political, focused on Elder McKinley's crushing of gay boxes in his brain" (Shaw 95). Yet, by setting this anxiety to up-tempo, major key song-and-dance, *Book of Mormon* confuses the audience's emotional response. Watching the number performed on Broadway, I vacillated between saddened empathy with the Mormons' sob stories and improbable cheerfulness as the their catchy songs and playful visuals won me over. The negative capability of "Turn It Off" – a confusing, ambivalent space of coexistent empathy and anxiety, dimness and brightness – is thus brought to the audience's explicit attention via the insistent audibility of tap dancing in the dark.

"Turn It Off" assigns its portrayal of homosexuality to the moment when the lights shut off and the taps continue. Musical theatre scholars have built off the work of Roland Barthes in theorizing the voice as inherently embodied: unseen singers are absent objects of desire, perceived by audiences as having "an imaginary *vocalic* body" (Taylor 229). Similarly, the invisible "voices" of the Mormons' tap shoes continue to ring out their presence in the darkness. This moment of disorientation, when the audience is forced to switch, shift, and *turn* from passively seeing to actively listening, exemplifies *Book of Mormon*'s negative capability. The repeated shuttling of the audience into a complex space of disembodied tap and repressed sexuality creates "points that do not accumulate in a straight line" (Ahmed 564). Darkness reorients the audience towards visible, undeniable gayness: as the lights flash on, the Mormons' floating tap voices are suddenly re-embodied with flashy, declarative pink vests. The reveal

simply confirms what we've heard already – McKinley's sexuality, like the sound of tap, can't be "turned off."

Whereas *Book Of Mormon*'s tap dancing missionaries shunt the audience into darkness, Josh Hilberman's *The Warrior* starts with spectacular confrontation. You can't look away as a single spotlight illuminates Hilberman, dressed in an outfit that is a far cry from the suits and dress pants just seen before his number. He's wearing a G-string and a loose chainmail vest adorned with metal taps at his heart and crotch. Taps are attached to each of his hands, and he wears "a black headband with a metal tap affixed at the forehead; a bracelet of taps around his biceps and shins; and a pair of black laced oxford tap shoes" (Hill 334). Decked out in this outrageous costume, Hilberman "work[s] up a beat that [is] at once rhythmically complex, satirical, and absurd," according to dance critic Brian Seibert. Building up from a base rhythm in his heels, Hilberman introduces counter rhythms with hand pats on the taps at his chest, forehead, bicep, and – to the enjoyment of the audience – his crotch.

Hill described it as follows:

> If you closed your eyes, you would hear a multitoned timbre of metallic rhythms, building in speed and intensity from whispering rushes of the beat to a fiery polyrhythmic brigade. Yet it was with eyes and ears wide open that Hilberman wanted his audience to enjoy his tap dancing assault on conservative views of "decency" [...]. His audience was at times shocked, amused, and enlightened, and it met the end of his performance with rigorous applause. (334)

The "conservative views" Hill mentions were explicitly on the mind of the audience, too. Tony Waag, the night's MC, had prefaced the dance with a newsbite on the Justice Department's

recent efforts to cover nude statues in their Great Hall. With pats on the crotch and a glimpse of butt cheeks, Hilberman echoed that controversy, exposing male skin that had never before been *seen* in tap, all while maintaining a stoic face the whole time. Yet, as Hill and Seibert have noted, his rhythms reside completely within the realm of tap. He channels sixteenth note paradiddles (*one-e-and-a*'s), extended sequences, and off-beat accents through not only his shoes, but also through the texturally varied palettes afforded through his costume. In this 2002 performance, Hilberman ends the number by eschewing even the "taps" of tap itself: vibrating his torso side to side, the rhythmic swish-clank of his chainmail vest is the final sound as the lights go out.

Audience responses were wide ranging. While it did end with the "rigorous applause" Hill mentions, there was plenty of laughter and shouts. Coming back onstage, Waag humorously said, "So that's what they're doing in Boston these days," but someone shouted back, 'Not all of them!' with another shouting 'That's not tap!'" (Hill 334). In a personal interview, Hilberman mentioned that "Savion was there, Slyde was there [...] a big contingency of traditionalists." Jimmy Slyde (1927 - 2008) was a veteran hoofer who worked through the bebop revolution in the fifties and into the twentieth-century, and his reaction was one of jokey amusement. In contrast, Glover was clearly offended by the performance and began "voicing his disapproval" halfway through the dance (Seibert). The next night, Glover continued to denounce *The Warrior*. When Waag invited him to improvise at the end of the show, Glover began copying "the pat-tapping motions" of Hilberman's choreography before shouting, "That's *not* what it's about!" (Hill 334). This declaration, which effectively excluded *The Warrior* from tap dance as defined by arguably the most popular tap dancer of that decade, caused a significant amount of controversy.

Hilberman was aware of the debate he would stir up with *The Warrior*. The atmosphere of tap dance at the turn of the century was one of heightened visibility, with national recognition and hundreds of festivals, classes, and workshops being held across the globe (Hill 329). Yet, Hilberman felt that the tap dance of the time was dominated by a certain definition, one that he was reacting to in *The Warrior*:

> In my early tap daze, I thought the dancing was 'feet only,' that tapping good enough technically was the only 'real' goal, and that attention to all the myriad complex details of performance and style were beside the point. I watched as a generation got so obsessed with the same idea, and fueled by anger and ignorance, abandoned the performance qualities that made tap great. Tap became the anti-performance art. ("The Warrior")

In my interview with him, he elaborated on this generational obsession with "feet only" and "anti-performance." *The Warrior*, Hilberman said, was his rejection and "commentary on the dumb, macho style" of the 2000s, which privileged an inward-directed improvisation. Such a style was being led by dancers like Glover, who called "for a focus on [...] sound and technique" ("Derick Grant"). This was accompanied by a rejection of performance – Glover would rarely look to the audience and often stood hunched over (Hill 310). As mentioned by Hill, Hilberman maintained the same level of sonic clarity that Glover upheld, but upends Glover's "feet only," or, to use a direct quote, "metal to the wood" mandate (334). *The Warrior*, Hilberman confirms, mobilizes "traditional" aspects – West African djembe rhythms, three-and-a-break structures, paddle-and-roll – but in a costume that exaggerates spectacle. Hilberman's repurposing of his

failure to fit in with tap dance norms of the time serves as an entry point into examining nascent queerness in *The Warrior*.

In his decoupling of tap authenticity from conventional images of male hoofers, Hilberman invites tap dancers to sonically imagine non-normative conceptions of gender and sexuality. Like in *Not So Impossible* and "Express," costuming plays an important role in destabilizing Hilberman's presentation of masculinity, but here it invokes two significant performances. Firstly, Hilberman's self-described "heavy metal fetish outfit" invokes a masculine image associated with gay sexual subcultures, in contrast to the more asexual femininities of the boy in the dress ("The Warrior"). And unlike the displaced voices of "Turn it Off," *The Warrior* firmly sites its mature connotations on a visible body. Secondly, the costume's construction allows for Hilberman's sound to be expanded above his ankles and beyond typical tap shoe textures. These two effects in conjunction with each other serve to imbue an aspect of tap dance with overtones of gender and sexuality not commonly ascribed to it – the rhythm. In my conversation with DeFrantz, he expressed to me the difficulty of queering pure rhythm. "Rhythm really isn't interested in gender," he noted, and he further posited that tap could be employed to connote "erotic unusualness" in certain contexts. In his collage of visually subversive homo-masculinity with audible tap rhythm, Hilberman may be approaching such an unusualness. By performing tap's rhythms beyond Glover's metaphorical horizon of tap dance – "metal to the wood" – Hilberman creates a performance that displaces the audience into a "dark" area of tap. *The Warrior* thus asks the audience to imagine a place in tap dance where two seeming impossibilities – hoofer homosexuality and tap dance without tap shoes – both reside.

**Conclusion**

Where is queer tap dance? My search for an answer to this question has led to several promising pathways, all of which resist heteronormativity through Ahmed's concepts of non-alignment and Halberstam's queerness via failure. The image of the tap dancing "boy in the dress" utilized in "Expressing Yourself" and *Not So Impossible* was employed to affirm non-normative male identities, disrupting "straight" configurations of male sex, masculine gender, and heterosexual orientation. A foray into the Lindy Hop of *Meet Ella* revealed the potential in dance partnering and musical deference for transgression of gender roles onstage and in social settings. I ended with an examination of the blackouts in "Turn It Off" and the brilliant spectacle of *The Warrior*. Both pieces cunningly perform paradox, impossibility, and queer darkness through the peculiar aurality of tap dance.

While these examples all suggest intriguing pathways towards a tap dance queerness, most of them are performed on white, male, cisgender bodies. With the exception of *Billy Elliot the Musical*, all of the performers in these dances are white, and Teicher and Hilberman both identify as straight.[5] Gene Kelly is quoted as calling tap dance "a man's game," and it appears to be a similar case when looking at queer tap dance (quoted in "Juanita Pitts" 5). Margaret Morrison describes how much of the tap dance archive is distorted by a "male center of gravity," where men embody "authentic artistry and women are considered weak imitators" ("Juanita Pitts" 6). This gravitational force works along racial lines as well, with white centers of gravity often excluding black hoofers from orbits of visibility and respect. In the end, DeFrantz's call for tap dance to be queered *and* blacked as "a gay male prerogative" has yet to be fulfilled

[5] The child actors of *Billy Elliot* are cast "color-blind," and thus there is a wide racial variation among Billys. For example, as a Filipino-American, I do not fit into typical racialized images of a working class boy from Northern England. On the other hand, Michaels are rarely non-white – I personally know of only one.

("Blacking Queer Dance" 105). Additionally, because queerness is so intertwined with failure, black performers are excluded from articulating the same kind of queer performance available to people with white privilege. DeFrantz points out that "black failure implies black success," the latter condition one that is constantly undermined and invisibilized by systematic racism – thus, queer black failure is an impossible oxymoron ("I Am Black" 16). Through these oppressive gravities and paradoxical conditions, women and non-white dancers and choreographers are excluded from queerness in tap dance.

This is not due to a lack of queer dancers in the tap community. In most of my interviews with people active in the tap dance community, my interviewees often mentioned fellow dancers who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or more generally, queer.[6] Nic Gareiss, who himself is a gay Irish step dancer, expressed a disappointment that, despite a diverse representation of orientation within the percussive dance community at large, most "non-straight people are making straight dances." Margaret Morrison, who herself identifies as a lesbian, has made works touching on themes of queerness that incorporate tap dance, but has had to market them *not* as concert tap dance, but as theatrical productions.

In this essay, I have located a handful of creative avenues towards a queer tap dance, but much work has to be done in widening these pathways for women, people of color, and, most importantly, queer hoofers themselves. Derick Grant said that the tap dance had constructed several divides within its community "between men and women [...] black and white, straight and homosexual" ("Derick Grant"). These violent binaries must be dismantled in the tap dance world – onstage and in academia. Nic Gareiss called *Not So Impossible* an instance of Teicher

[6] In this thesis, I have avoided "outing" these dancers, sidestepping Tucker's "Where's Waldo" exercise. Nevertheless, safe lines of communication should and must be opened up to queer hoofers active today.

using his privilege as a straight white male in a beneficial way: by creating tap choreography that rightfully brings a relevant topic – non-binary gender expression – to a dance form that has yet to address it.

Teicher, Gareiss, and Morrison have all stressed the importance of space and venues for these types of tap dance experimentation to happen. In our interview, Teicher said that in order to promote "a wider sense of gender and sexuality in tap dance, it's a matter of providing the space for people to do so." Morrison compared it to the postmodern dance movement of the 1980s – tap dance needs its own Judson Churches and PS122s in order to move forward. The risks, re-orientations, and resistances of queer expression will continue to be scarce if contemporary hoofers don't have the necessary support and opportunities. Space for tap dance should be intersectional and inclusive, not unlike the dance floor where I first thought of this thesis. Going forward, tap dance must be a floor open to queer voices from all hoofers – a looser, more welcoming place for queer creativity.[7]

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