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Tools of Engagement in Urban Bush Women's Hairstories

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TOOLS OF ENGAGEMENT IN URBAN BUSH WOMEN’S HAIRSTORIES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Urban Bush Women’s contemporary dance work, HairStories, through the lens of three musical impulses as explained by ethnomusicologist Craig Werner: blues, jazz, and gospel. Werner developed this musical framework to analyze black music from the 1950’s to the present to provide additional insight into America’s struggle to be a democracy. Interestingly, Werner’s theory can be applied to the movement and message of Urban Bush Women’s HairStories to understand the piece’s embodied method of grappling with the burden of America’s racial history. Through the driving thematic concept of hair, choreographer Jawole Zollar and her company take the viewer on a journey that addresses black women and community. This journey intersperses personal history, notable hair figures, and creative representations of hair rituals to educate multicultural audiences, validate multiple voices, and reveal the necessity of community in challenging racist and sexist social injustice. Demonstrated through often humorous and sometimes tragic childhood stories of getting hair done, the blues impulse offers a cathartic release that allows overwhelming experiences to be bearable. The jazz impulse is evidenced through a Dr. Professor character, who questions assumptions of race and gender in language and movement. Jazz also encourages the constant process of redefinition – to self, to community, and to the past. The final impulse, gospel, suggests that redemption, transcendence, and freedom are found communally.
FOREWORD

Urban Bush Women and My Hair Story

I was first introduced to Urban Bush Women through a photograph during my senior year at the University of Wisconsin - Madison. The memorable image was shown in a summer course I was taking in African American art. The simple shot, likely a publicity photo of the company, did not capture Urban Bush Women dancing, nor do I recall accompanying video or discussion about their work. What I do remember is being captivated by the array, strength, and beauty of the women shown in that picture.

I knew very little about dance when I saw the photo of Urban Bush Women. In fact, my limited experience with dance to this point included a hazy memory of a summer tap class from which I remember exactly one step. I also took an intro to Modern Jazz class my first semester in college where I learned the five ballet positions. Unfortunately, in spite of receiving an “A” in the course, I remember little else. Later in my college career, I had an opportunity to see the company of Bill T. Jones perform, so in spite of my peripheral exposure, when I saw the Urban Bush Women photo, I knew what modern dance was. However, what struck me about the photo was not a fascination with dance (it would be some time before that manifested). Rather, it was the faces of these women of color, vital and confident in their vibrant physicality, which caught and held my attention.

By my senior year of college, I was finishing my fourth year as a staff member at the Respite Center, a crisis childcare center, where I cared for children ages 0-14 from a variety of stressed backgrounds. During my time there, I began to be aware of the relatively few positive images the youth of color were shown, either in the community or by society at large. This was particularly poignant with the young girls. As part of a bedtime routine I often “did their hair” while they shared their dissatisfaction with their hair, skin, and body shape and their wishes to be physically different. The photo of the Urban Bush Women became something I could call upon as evidence that wider possibilities existed for these young girls than they were being shown.

A few years after graduation, I found myself back in Wisconsin, this time at UW-Milwaukee. I had originally planned to take a few classes to prepare for graduate school in English. What I found was a BA in Dance that would allow me to immerse myself in a program that had an emphasis in the intersections of race, class, gender, and art. I had a scholarly
foundation, and experiential knowledge gleaned through work, but what I needed was the physical tool kit that dance provided – something tangible that would allow me to attune to the children I was working with and potentially give them skills which might offer some release, comfort, or even hope.

I engaged in coursework in yoga, modern, ballet, jazz, hip-hop and introductions to various other forms of movement. At the same time, I was working at La Causa, a crisis childcare center in Milwaukee, serving kids 0-12. While similar in intention to Madison’s Respite Center, Milwaukee’s size, its history of segregation, and the city’s troubled foster care system lent itself to a greater scope of childhood trauma. Thankfully, I now had more than just a photograph – I was building an arsenal of movement modalities to use with the kids – from the calming of yoga, to the power of improvisation through jazz or hip-hop, I used movement as a way to communicate with children, many of whom had little ability or desire to trust adults and were already jaded by an ill-equipped system.

I continued this work when I moved to Tallahassee for graduate school at Florida State University. I spent a year working in the childcare center at Refuge House, a domestic violence center. Throughout my decade working in crisis childcare, I was working to create something to counteract the experience of feeling negative in and toward one’s body. A moving body became a place where I could reach children, to allow them to feel comfortable, even for just a moment. I watched children see that they could change how they felt, improve their dexterity, and sometimes even gain mastery over one skill or another – versus feeling negatively defined by their physicality.

I completed the first year of grad school and in 2005, and was given an opportunity to intern in the office of Urban Bush Women in Brooklyn. It was here that I was introduced to HairStories. It was the piece in Urban Bush Women’s repertory that spoke most directly to the young girls I had served over the years. However, before I could write my thesis, I would have to experience my own surprising hair story. What began as a topic to honor all of the girls I had had the privilege of knowing through my work in crisis childcare would become subject matter that provided solace and grounding as I negotiated the treacherous and confusing terrain that accompanies losing one’s hair through illness.

In the time between picking the topic of HairStories for my thesis and actually completing the task, I would very personally come to understand how much hair matters. Less
than a year after I completed my coursework in American Dance Studies, I was diagnosed with a brain tumor, which was accidently found during a brain scan looking for an aneurism (the aneurism test was ordered after I was diagnosed with Poly-Cystic Kidney Disease). In a six week time period, I went from believing myself to be a fit, healthy 32-year old, to someone who was facing brain surgery and a degenerative kidney disease.

Fortunately, because of where the growth was located, the neurosurgeon was optimistic that I had a benign tumor. However, based on its size, it needed to be removed before it began to affect my brain functioning. As it was much too big to consider radiation, surgery was really the only option. The entire mass would be removed, then biopsied to test for cancer.

It all seemed very straight-forward. I would have the surgery in six weeks. Finding the tumor early allowed me to avoid the deterioration of my motor skills and, if all went well, I would not need physical therapy after surgery. I was fortunate to be in relatively good shape and would have the advantage of good health going into the operation. From the surgery, I would find out if what I had was indeed a meningioma (a benign tumor growing in the lining of the brain) or if the growth was cancerous. I certainly wondered if I would die, if I would lose any physical or mental abilities, and when I would be able to return to dance and yoga. However, it was the impending loss of my hair that made the whole experience real for me.

Along with thoughts about whether I had used my time on earth wisely, I also feared that I might have an oddly shaped skull. While I wondered if I had cancer, I also contemplated if I might look boyish and unpretty once I shaved my head. I am not alone in the attachment I feel toward my hair. I was given the choice to keep my hair. My doctor told me that the rates of infection during recovery were increased for those who kept their hair, but that he was willing to work around it, if I chose to keep my tresses. Logically, it does not seem like much of a choice, but I wrestled with it, trying to have ownership of something that otherwise felt completely out of my control.

I got myself organized by creating easy to read, step-by step instructions for paying bills and other tasks of daily life in case I was compromised by surgery. I worked extra hours at my job to save money. I spent time with loved ones. I was not in denial. However, it was not until the hairdresser shaved the last lock off that I really felt the weight of what was happening to me. I looked into the mirror and saw that I was now a sick person, someone who had something wrong growing in their brain. Shaving off my hair did not feel empowering like I had released a
warrior within; it did not feel like a weight off my shoulders; it did not indicate a fresh start. I felt small, scared, and defenseless. In hindsight, how I felt seem like appropriate emotions for what I was about to experience. Something totally unnatural was going to happen to my brain, and it took losing my hair to connect with the feelings of powerlessness that often accompany the experience of illness.

By losing my hair, what I came to understand was that my feelings of powerlessness were just the beginning of some universal occurrences that confront those of us who get sick. Virtually everyone hassles with uncooperative insurance agencies, many of us find changes in our perceived support network and, often, encouragement may come in surprising forms. I became a member of several new communities: those who have been hospitalized, those who have been through surgery, those who have had brain tumors. I became linked to women who had lost their hair due to illness, hormonal changes or stress.

What my hair experience allowed me was a connection to other women for whom being unwell caused them to lose their hair. I understand the connection between hair and femininity. I know what it feels like to think you look boyish—I worried that I looked too intimidating without a frame of layers to soften my appearance. Now, when I see an ill woman, I have a visceral connection to her and what I imagine the complicated array of feelings she may be having about her experience as played out through her hair.

In hindsight, it might seem trite to worry about hair when I had a brain tumor. However, I believe it is not so different when a young girl wishes for straight hair when she is growing up in a volatile home. Hair seems like something we have some manner of control over (unlike brain tumors or childhood instability). When my hair was shaved off for surgery, I felt like my sickness was on the outside. While the accompanying feelings of vulnerability were unsettling, I also knew that my experience was honest. Being physically unwell is one of the most vulnerable places one can be— in the early days following surgery, I relied entirely on others to keep me alive, I was not capable of taking care of myself. As days passed and I could move a bit more, my hair was the most visible symbol/sight of how damaged my body was. I needed the compassion of those around me, which, I think, was triggered by my shaved head. Interestingly, my hair re-growth also marked my recovery. It would take about two years to grow out my hair, mirroring the time it took for me to feel like myself physically.
In *HairStories*, Jawole Zollar suggests that shaving her head allowed her to see through her sister’s eyes. In a very real way, I now feel that I can see through the eyes of my sisters who have been unwell or continue to battle disease. The part of me that was sick is connected to all women who have come before and those who will follow, who have examined how their hair defines their femaleness. Some face this by choice, but for others, it is thrust upon them. Yet, these hair experiences connect us. As the message of *HairStories* suggests, it is through community that we will transcend our limitations and ultimately find freedom. Hopefully, those who grapple with what hair means will discover a deeper sense of self and find solace and inspiration through a connection to community.
INTRODUCTION

_A Change is Gonna Come_ is my attempt to help renew a process of racial healing that at times seems to have stopped dead. Like Marvin Gaye, I believe that black music provides a clear vision of how we might begin to come to terms with the burdens of our shared history.

~Werner, _A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America_

Craig Werner’s work, _A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race & the Soul of America_ (2006), argues that the music of an era reveals the tensions and aspirations of that time. While my thesis does not cover the landscape that Werner’s work does (he mainly focuses on music in the last half of the twentieth century), I believe that his central tenants—the primary cultural influence of gospel, blues, and jazz impulses as expressed through African American music—extend beyond the musical genre and also reveal a cultural relevance inherent in African American dance. Specifically, Werner’s music theory can be applied equally well to the movement and message of _HairStories_, a contemporary dance piece created by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and her predominately African American, all female company, Urban Bush Women. _HairStories_, through movement and storytelling, offers an artistic expression of African American femininity and examines ways to empower, create and connect to community as a method of grappling with the burden of America’s racial history. Concerning this past, Werner argues that the music of the sixties and seventies provides additional insight into the freedom movements of the time, allowing for a deeper appreciation of the era’s success and pitfalls as America wrestled with granting more liberties to women and racial/ethnic minorities. Interestingly, _HairStories_ comments on the same issues. Through this dance Zollar uses the subject of hair to investigate the current state of American race relations—what works and what needs improvement in the quest for an equitable society. Both _A Change is Gonna Come_ and _HairStories_ are derived from a desire to understand history as it shapes our present, to demonstrate the resilience of the human spirit and, ultimately, to successfully navigate the choppy water of a multicultural society.

At its core, Urban Bush Women’s work _HairStories_ uses hair and its accompanying rituals as a mechanism through which racism and sexism are analyzed. By looking at these issues through the lens of Werner’s theories of the blues impulse, the jazz impulse, and the
gospel impulse, it becomes clear that choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar takes the audience on a journey that addresses black women and community. This journey intersperses personal history, notable hair figures, and creative representations of hair rituals to educate multicultural audiences, validate multiple voices, and demonstrate the necessity of community in challenging racist and sexist social injustice. The journey ends with a rousing house dance conclusion, suggesting that movement and dance, with the participation of everyone, offers a path to freedom.

Through the journey of examining hair experiences (principally from the perspective of African American women), Urban Bush Women uses *HairStories* to present the confusing entangled forces that create lived culture. For example, getting one’s hair done is a process of socialization into African American female culture. This can be a quite positive experience that connects generations and strengthens the ties between women. Conversely, it can be extremely negative, especially when women recount how physically painful getting one’s hair done can be. Additionally, some women describe the attempts at stifling their individual creative expression or even their political views through their hair. This mix of good and bad, which comes from inside the culture, is juxtaposed against the powerful (racially linked) forces outside African American culture that underscore a hierarchical aesthetic of whiteness, consciously or no. Because of this, Zollar draws upon African American hair as a racial marker in America and uses this as a thematic foundation for her dance, which probes the sociopolitical problems African American women face, as well as America’s struggle with racial prejudice. Such a mix of influence makes for an incredibly nuanced approach to these issues, including an embrace of resistance and agency, despite often overwhelming, stifling conditions.

The cross of political and personal influences that shape the stories told by the participants of *HairStories* denotes the complicated racial and gendered history of America. Essentially, *HairStories* is a work that engages in a dialogue that began as soon as enslaved people arrived in America. The piece centers around a discussion of the legacy of how enslavement—as evidenced through African American women’s hair—continues to affect the American political, economic, and social climate.

The work, which debuted in 2001 as part of the Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival in Becket, MA, was an exceptional contribution to concert dance largely because of how the story was told. Urban Bush Women’s *HairStories*, was presented as a new performance genre, the “live stage
documentary’ that combines documentary film techniques, conversations with the audience, text, choreography, and music” (UBW press release for the 2001/02 tour). Even by current standards, the presentation of *HairStories* is entirely atypical for concert dance. More than this, the subject matter alone, addressing African American women’s hair, has no precedence on the concert dance stage. The piece gathered stories told by participants from community engagement projects. These projects, which included hair parties and story circles, allowed women to share their personal and collective history through the topic of hair. Together, these stories were woven into a full-length concert dance, along with stories from Zollar’s personal history, prominent figures related to African American hair, and depictions of common hair experiences. The piece is performed by the seven member all-female company, including a narrator called “Dr. Professor,” and occasional performative moments by Zollar. It consists of nearly twenty vignettes and runs about seventy-five minutes. *HairStories* offers a compelling mix of personal recollections and collective experiences, making for work grounded in community. Furthermore, as Werner’s blues, jazz, and gospel impulses demonstrate, it is a piece concerned with creating, connecting, and galvanizing community.

I have chosen Werner’s premise because the gospel, blues, and jazz impulses he describes can be applied to *HairStories* to facilitate a deeper, unique understanding of the underrepresented history of African American women as told through hair. Currently, Dr. Craig Werner is a professor of Afro-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; he teaches courses through the departments of English, Afro-American Studies, and Integrated Liberal Studies, focusing on the examination of cultural history through music and literature. As an ethno-musicologist, he frequently writes about the role of music during the Civil Rights era. His cross-disciplinary approach is evident in his writing, which makes adapting his theory from *A Change is Gonna Come* organic in its application to analyzing dances, such as *HairStories*. In his book, Werner is specifically interested in how black music functions as an avenue to generating a multi-layered understanding of America’s complex history. He believes that an examination of the music of a given era will increase the understanding of what people actually experienced, felt, and how they responded. Similarly, though *HairStories*, Urban Bush Women detail an element of racism and sexism experienced by African American women by telling their hair stories. Urban Bush Women use the stories of hair to enhance the understanding of
America’s race and gender history, just as Werner uses music to add another layer to American political and cultural history.

Werner contends that music allows for a more comprehensive understanding of any given era by giving a voice to multiple perspectives and encompassing the often paradoxical human experience. For Werner, the human experience plays out through specific musical impulses, such as the gospel, blues, and jazz impulses, which best illuminate the messages imbedded in HairStories. The blues impulse uses self expression as a tool for enduring personal suffering. For HairStories, this point of view surfaces in the childhood stories of grappling with racism and through frequent use of humor in vignettes that address seemingly hopeless situations. The jazz impulse, which encourages redefinition and reinvention, is identifiable in the probing, questioning style of HairStories. Through text and movement, especially in the Dr. Professor character, this impulse pushes both language and bodies to examine assumptions and challenge complacency. Finally, the gospel impulse offers redemption through community bonding and provides the foundational expression of the final segment in HairStories, a section that uses dance to demonstrate the possibilities inherent in a community coming together through movement.

Examining HairStories through the lens of these impulses is a way of “reading” a piece about hair that presents a combination of historical, social, and personal histories. The musical impulses provide a language that indicates HairStories’ shifts from personal disaffection to finding one’s voice, leading to ultimate wholeness through a community created by shared struggle. In the words of dance scholar Ananya Chatterjea, HairStories embodies “the politics of defiant hope,” by transforming alienation into the healing force of community-based artwork (Chatterjea 42). My goal is to examine how Zollar and Urban Bush Women manifested this “defiant hope” in their work and contributed to the healing of a nation divided by racism and sexism.

Werner begins his work with concise definitions of the impulses. He organizes his theory into the blues, jazz and gospel “impulses,” an idiom he borrows from Ralph Ellison. These impulses, he writes, “provide a way of thinking through the most fundamental human problems…The blues, jazz, and gospel impulses highlight black music’s refusal to simplify reality or devalue emotion” (Werner xv-xvi).
According to Werner, the blues won’t lie about the evil that exists in the world or the vice that exists within each person. There is strength in that truth and sharing the blues can provide the catharsis necessary to make another day bearable. The blues impulse fosters self-expression to survive. In HairStories, the blues impulse can be identified through the personal stories of Jawole Zollar. These recollections depict the challenging Zollar experiences because of hair and by extension her relationships with her mother, sister and ultimately herself. The humor and bravado mixed with sadness of Zollar’s stories allow her to rise to meet another day, even as the circumstances around her feel overwhelming.

The blues impulse holds the heart of the work – essentially, the story of little girls being subjected to painful hair treatments, judgments and reprimands as their hair becomes a battle site in a larger conflict. The blues impulse speaks to the complicated relationships within families – between mothers and daughters and siblings – as children begin to make sense of themselves and the world around them during these hair rituals. Childhood memories are especially important in conveying the messages inherent in HairStories; it is a painful history for which laughter underscores the tragedy. And, while humor is an essential part of this impulse, the blues also represents the feeling of being powerless and alienated from oneself and one’s community. The blues express pain with no expectation of the situation changing. This is often cathartic, and as such, provides some sustenance to the performer and audience.

While the blues impulse has to do with the individual enduring their circumstances, the jazz impulse encourages a step beyond just surviving. The jazz impulse seeks to change the questions being asked, discover new insight, and get fresh answers. Jazz pushes for constant redefinition—within the individual, through the individual’s relationship with community, and the individual’s link to tradition. In HairStories, the jazz impulse works to challenge assumptions of race and gender. With a focus on language and dance, the piece works to understand how to undo destructive patterns and create new possibilities. This specifically manifests through the character of the Dr. Professor. Through text and movement, she challenges conventions in language that uphold racist and sexist ideology to envision a more equitable future.

The Dr. Professor speaks to the audience as though she is lecturing in a college forum. She offers lengthy diatribes to underscore the movement of the dancers with whom she shares the stage. She maintains a balance between classroom decorum and circus ringleader, making sure that nothing, whether it is history, politics, or satire, is missed. The piece uses Dr. Professor
to analyze the power that words have to create perceived reality. For instance, the divisiveness between “good” hair and “bad” hair is explored. This seemingly simple labeling masks deep-seated beliefs about beauty. Urban Bush Women shine a light on this division in hopes of dismantling categorization, which ultimately damages self-perception and causes undo pain. Additionally, reclaiming words like “nappy” offers an empowering opportunity to turn what has been used against you as a means of connecting community through language.

Along with challenging language, the jazz impulse makes space for complexity and ambiguity. In the segment about Madam C.J. Walker, Zollar reads a letter to Madam Walker expressing her respect for Walker’s entrepreneurial spirit, while questioning how Walker’s business capitalized on women’s insecurities. The vignette wrestles with Walker’s legacy, considering the complicated effects of her actions. HairStories also uses the movement of the piece to underscore this message. The dancers work through an incredible physical range. Vulnerability and weakness are juxtaposed with toughness and bravado showing the complexity of womenhood through an equally complex movement vocabulary. The effect is to keep the viewer from making simple assumptions about people based on what they hear or see. In both history and movement, HairStories channels the jazz impulse to undo sexist and racist assumptions by challenging complacency in the understanding of past and present.

As the blues impulse looks at the individual experience, and the jazz impulse questions the individual in relationship to others, the gospel impulse offers an answer to individual or collective isolation and that solution is found through the coming together of community. Gospel seeks a spiritual connection to community while simultaneously instigating political upheaval as needed. The gospel impulse is saturated in love—it represents the best in each of us—compelling us to work for the greater good. In HairStories, the gospel impulse is primarily concerned with connection to community as a means to redemption and transcendence. To this end, call-and-response is a tool used to engage the viewer and challenge passivity. Interestingly, HairStories builds in its use of the gospel impulse, culminating in a cathartic community ritual, the house dance finale, which illustrates the energy of connecting to community and the potential of collective action.

The gospel influence threads throughout HairStories, as Urban Bush Women are believers in overcoming, in healing, in transcendence. Gospel is the overriding belief in the goodness of humanity that, in the end, this system of inequality will be overcome. It often
pushes for an almost utopian vision in its hope for sustained change, suggesting that while a world in which little girls suffer for beauty ideals that diminish their fundamental humanity cannot be justified, each individual life can be redeemed. This salvation is open to everyone. Ultimately, hair—once an object of derision—becomes reclaimed as a symbol of power and beauty. Here again we see that the vignettes within *HairStories* represent a hard-earned engagement with “defiant hope.”

The gospel impulse seeks redemption and is energized through the coming together of community. A community united by this shared hope generates a palpable force, a sense of oneness, of being in “the zone” together. The final segment in particular is full gospel magic—a coming together for all those willing to go through the work of educating themselves about history, feeling the pain, and needing the recharge of a house party to push them into the world to start the revolution.

The gospel, blues, and jazz impulses in *HairStories* harken to the same ideals that Werner ascribes to the music he examines. The blues impulse will be examined as it flows through the autobiographical sequences in *HairStories*, including a look at the inconsistency of memory, relationships between women and the role of humor in the work of Urban Bush Women. *HairStories*’ jazz impulse is examined next. The jazz impulse challenges assumptions of race and gender. Through the process of constant redefinition of self, community, and the past, individuals challenge outmoded ways of thinking. This is especially evident in the Dr. Professor’s narrations. Finally, the gospel influence is traced with particular focus on the correlations to house dance and the use of call-and-response as means of connecting to community in the search for redemption. The examination of Werner’s three musical impulses as they relate to Urban Bush Women’s *HairStories* leads to a conclusion about how *HairStories* continues to be culturally and politically relevant today.

As interpreted through the blues, jazz, and gospel impulses, the vignettes in *HairStories* represent, add to, and complicate American history and demonstrate how this has created the present. Werner contends that, “Music never happens in straight lines. The lines connecting events extend across space and time in tangled, irreducible patterns. All forms of storytelling oversimplify the patterns, but music simplifies less than most. Structurally, music mirrors the complications of history.” (Werner xiii-xiv) Similarly, *HairStories*, through a skilled use of dance and text allows for an examination of the stories behind history—the voices of those who
have experienced social mores, trends, and attitudes, making possible a fuller picture of how America has come to be.
CHAPTER ONE
How HairStories Came To Be

The blues, jazz, and gospel impulses provide a language through which to examine the importance of community, a consistent theme imbedded within HairStories. Yet, before beginning an analysis of how Werner’s impulses relate to Zollar’s work, it is important to contextualize HairStories by examining Jawole Zollar’s personal history and how this influenced the founding principles of Urban Bush Women Dance Company. Additionally, background on the creation of the piece and a brief summary of each section provide further support in articulating the importance of community to HairStories. A constant thread through Zollar’s childhood experiences, dance influences, and the creation of Urban Bush Women is the necessity of community to survive, grow, and thrive in life. Hence, the message of connection that is imbedded in HairStories is consistent with the mission of Zollar and Urban Bush Women.

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, the second of five children, was raised in Kansas City, Missouri, during the 1950’s. Due to Kansas City’s racial segregation, Zollar grew up in an African American community, experiencing almost no contact with white people until she went to college. Her mother was a jazz singer, so Zollar grew up in an artistic environment that provided exposure to abundant artistic outlets. Of her childhood, Zollar describes “…growing up in segregation, growing up in a very strong community, where literally…the whole community raised you.” (Zollar interview, 2010) Zollar’s comment indicates how segregation was limiting, but her close-knit community responded to those conditions with stability and support for its youth.

Though steeped in the support of community, Jawole and other youth of her 1950’s Midwestern culture needed their own expressive outlet through which to grapple with life’s obstacles. For Zollar, this expression came through dance:

…I grew up steeped in African American traditions. Everything that we did from you know how we walked to school, to the cheerleaders, to the drill team, to every aspect of that was steeped in separation. So these cultural forms… the things that were born in what we call the inner city or the density of segregation, those shaped me (Zollar interview, 2010).

As with her earlier comment, Zollar captures the ambiguity of her childhood, much of which is explored in HairStories. Her immersion in African American traditions grounded her in a strong
community and later played a tremendous part in her artistic work. Yet, a continual issue is that her experience within this community, including the development of her own cultural heritage, was built upon a nationally legislated oppression of racial segregation.

Dance often functioned as a tool for escaping the racial problems surrounding her. As a young girl, Zollar formally trained in the Dunham technique, but she continually absorbed the vernacular dance forms around her. As a college student, she began to recognize a disconnect between the dance she had been exposed to as a youngster and that which she was being taught in college—primarily modern and ballet (Chatterjea 10-11). In her dissertation, dance scholar Veta Goler describes how, even as a student, Zollar began to define her artistic voice. Goler writes of how many of Zollar’s contemporaries embraced abstract work. Abstraction had evolved in the 1960’s in response to established modern dance techniques and methods of choreography such as that of Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey. Zollar, along with other African American choreographers, continued to make pieces with a narrative or literal meaning, often commenting on social issues and seeking to involve viewers in the thematic exploration, rather than make work they considered inaccessible (Goler 138-139). She completed a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Missouri in 1976 and in 1978 received a Master of Fine Arts from Florida State University. Zollar stayed in Tallahassee to teach for two years after completing her degree, before moving to New York City in the early eighties.

Once in New York City, Zollar began studying with Dianne McIntyre at Sounds in Motion. McIntyre encouraged her to make work of her own, and Zollar routinely created choreography for the Studio Works Series concerts during the four years she was worked with McIntyre. Zollar began to articulate a way of telling stories through movement that emphasized a human connection. Adding to the individual artistic voice she was beginning to cultivate in school, and now on her own, she also drew from prominent figures in the dance field. Two noted choreographers in particular, Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus, were profoundly influential in the development of Zollar’s style.

Katherine Dunham was a noted anthropologist specializing in the dances of the Caribbean. In 1935 Dunham received her first grant to study abroad and she spent considerable time examining the African presence throughout the Caribbean Diaspora. She was particularly interested in the use of dance in ritual and how enslaved Africans retained elements of community life from Africa after their forced removal from their homeland (Perpener 129, 137).
She began to formulate a technique that combined dances of the Caribbean with ballet and modern. In 1937, Dunham had her first opportunity to present her choreography in New York City. Her dances illustrated the connection between African, Caribbean, and African American cultures. The blending of techniques demonstrated the retention of experiential memory through the body (Osumare, 10-11).

Mixing aesthetics as she did was Dunham’s method of challenging notions of primitivism, which plagued African and African American dances. Primitivism surfaced as a pervasive label by white dance critics. The stigma served to limit Dunham’s work as simplistic, even inferior, while it also created her as Other, exotic and popular as an entertainment commodity. Dunham countered the stereotypes by using both her anthropologic and concert work to build viewers’ basic literacy about black diasporic dance forms, which slowly replaced primitivism as the method of interpreting black dance (Kraut 449).

Similarly, Zollar uses dance in *HairStories* to educate viewers about an aspect of African American female life that may be misunderstood when not connected to the larger history of hair culture in Africa, enslavement in America, and sexist and racist attitudes that have continued since enslavement. In *HairStories*, Zollar and company challenge racist and sexist ideology through the use of education and humor. Just as Dunham worked to create context for African American dance through both stage and scholarly endeavors, Zollar uses *HairStories* to build a basic vocabulary to develop dialogue and correct cultural misinterpretations by connecting hair to a complex historical framework. Moreover, like Dunham’s mix of movement aesthetics, Zollar uses a mix of theatrical techniques, dance, singing, and text to express the messages of her work.

Along with the blending of performative elements, Dunham’s movement vocabulary also impressed Zollar. As noted earlier, Zollar studied with Joseph Stevenson, a former Dunham dancer. Zollar has noted that he called the style he taught “Afro-Cuban” and that it prioritized “dancing from the inside out” (Kreemer 214). Reflecting this sentiment, Zollar’s work has always featured dance that is expressive and engaging, rather than perfectly synced movement. Zollar’s choreography embodies Dunham’s approach that the form should serve the function. In her article, “Dancing the Black Atlantic: Katherine Dunham’s Research-to-Performance Method,” dance scholar Halifu Osumare writes, “In the Dunham dance technique, the student learns that the actual movements and body orientation of a particular dance directly relates to the
function of that dance in the social sphere” (Osumare 4). Hence, in a manner similar to Dunham, Zollar derives the form of her choreography to match the function. Zollar often (and explicitly in HairStories) works to engage the audience and take them on a journey to expand their understanding of an experience or issue. Therefore, the mix of performance (dance, text, video, singing, poetry) that she employs serves to continuously connect the viewer to the message.

Like Dunham, Pearl Primus also influenced Zollar’s choreographic style. Primus was an anthropologist who researched dance and culture in Africa and the American South. Dance scholar John Perpener distinguishes between Dunham and Primus, writing, “Dunham’s performance style reflected a glamorous and sensual persona. Primus, on the other hand, was more elemental, more visceral. When she danced, she wrenched movement from the air and then brought it down to its earthly conclusion. At other times, she imbued stillness with the elegant primal austerity of an African woodcarving” (Perpener 162). Reflected in her movement, Primus devoted herself to examining various dance styles of Africa and to understanding how African dance functioned in society. From this, she strove to encapsulate these experiences in movement and to impart to audiences a sense of how bodies can express emotion and augment life’s major and minor occurrences (Perpener 171). Her movement functioned as the medium through which her cultural and political statements reached audiences. Zollar’s Africa Diaries and Southern Diaries (2004, 2005) are based on Primus’ diaries. In fact, part of Southern Diaries incorporates Primus’ Hard Time Blues. Additionally, Zollar responds to Primus’ piece Strange Fruit by incorporating Nina Simone’s song by the same name into Southern Diaries. The two-part work (including the restaging) was created from Primus’ careful notes taken during her time spent doing field research in Africa and the American South. Zollar carries forward Primus’ message, continuing to use movement to explore the connections between African and America and illustrate the profound consequences of enslavement on bodies, communities, and cultures.

The anthropologists Dunham and Primus both investigated and experienced dance to understand more about the African American experience by looking to the specific cultures that created it. Through their work on the concert dance stage, Zollar and Urban Bush Women continue in the footsteps of these two dance pioneers. On a practical level, Zollar and her company utilized anthropologic methods in creating HairStories including conducting interviews, drawing cross-cultural comparisons, examining media tactics (as in the Williams sisters vignette), and incorporating historical analysis (Madam C.J. Walker) to create a picture of
African American hair culture. Sharing the dance-making techniques of progenitors in dance demonstrates the value that many African cultures place on remaining connected to the ancestors. Moreover, Zollar’s exacting research allows for a complex picture to be presented, drawing similarities between experiences and indicating the wealth of history and experience that creates such intricate culture.

In terms of the body of work created, as Dunham once studied the African Diaspora through the dances of the Caribbean and Primus did with her work in Africa, Urban Bush Women have presented element of African American female life through dance. Zollar and Urban Bush Women draw on the dance aesthetics established in Africa and manipulated in the Caribbean – an aesthetic that emphasizes the ability of dance to capture and express elements of culture that exist beyond words and is able to connect and sustain communities. Clearly, as foremothers of modern dance, Dunham and Primus have left their mark on Zollar’s work, in particular, *HairStories*. As dance elements of Dunham and Primus made their way into the piece, Zollar paid tribute to the African American female choreographers who preceded her, inspiring and informing her dance making and maintaining links to the vital legacy that Dunham and Primus, as powerful, articulate, intellectual artists, left behind.

Zollar persists in the transatlantic scholarly dance inquiry of Dunham and Primus by highlighting the African American aesthetics in American culture. Zollar continues this work through her own company, Urban Bush Women, which she founded in New York City in 1984. Over the past 25 years, the company has evolved into a seven-member female troupe known for telling the stories of under-represented and disenfranchised people—not just the African American experience, but also other alienated groups, such as the homeless. Urban Bush Women’s work has tackled issues of abortion, democracy, and enslavement through a creative process that is often conducted collectively. Director Zollar typically gleans work generated from the dancers through improvisation and other creative exercises during rehearsal. In doing so, Jawole Zollar uses her lived experience and that of her dancers to create context for larger social issues. Zollar and her dancers continuously challenge the confounding mores of race, gender, class, and sexuality that influence contemporary culture.

In her article, “The Hair Parties Project Case Study: Urban Bush Women,” author Caron Atlas writes that the company’s tri-fold mission is “the creation and performance of works for the stage; artist training in dance and community engagement; and public projects that encourage
cultural activity as an inherent part of company life” (Atlas 2). As Atlas indicates, the mission of the company is to balance a commitment to concert dance with an equal dedication to community. Zollar’s founding objective reflects her interwoven approach to the creative process, her dancers’ training and utilization, and engaging of local communities.

This relationship to community is where a piece such as HairStories is born. Uniquely, in HairStories, participants involved in the hair parties and story circles that preceded the performance were included in the communal creative process. Atlas writes about the origins of HairStories and hair parties, the accompanying community engagement project. She describes how Zollar began hair parties (gatherings where women swapped personal stories about getting their hair done) as a method of gathering information for the performance work, but these parties soon developed into something that went beyond preparation for the stage (Atlas 3). In her article, Atlas detailed what happened at hair parties. She described how participants began the parties with an agreement to be respectful and open to one another. Participants also agreed to keep the experience fun. Exercises varied at the sessions and included asking participants to assess their hair and give a “weather report.” Other sessions asked individuals to describe what made their hair unique or what caught their attention about others’ hair. Some parties encouraged participants to describe or perform any fantasies they might have about their hair (Atlas 5). Such exercises prompted a personal investment in participation and allowed individuals to see their experiences as part of a larger story.

Zollar comments specifically on how hair parties inspired Urban Bush Women to take their dialogue work more seriously when it became clear that the parties had potential for discussion beyond the needs for creating the piece. She says, “…when people entered through the subject of hair—race, class, and gender—things come up. But, if you say I want to have a gathering to discuss race, class, and gender, who wants to do that? And so there was a fun context of it. But we also weren’t that well trained in dialogue” (Zollar interview, 2010). Zollar goes on to say that the work at hair parties inspired her to seek formal dialogue/facilitation training for the company which really allowed Urban Bush Women’s community engagement work to crystallize. As the company took dialogic training more seriously, hair parties offered the opportunity to educate and empower people about race and gender. Through such events, community was both created and reinforced. Both the making of HairStories and the eventual
performance sought to validate the experience of African American women, generate dialogue and connect people through the topic of hair.

Commissioned by Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, the New England Foundation for the Arts, the National Dance Project, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Scottsdale Center for the Arts, Danspace Project at St. Mark’s Church and Mass MoCA (UBW press release for the 2001/02 tour), HairStories debuted in 2001. It premiered in Becket, MA at Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival, August 23-26, 2001. At that time, the company had more than twenty dances in its repertory. Works such as Womb Wars and Batty Moves acted as forerunners for HairStories—pieces set on and about the politicized female body. While HairStories is representative of the themes emblematic of Urban Bush Women’s history of politicization, the mix of dancing, theatrical vignettes, and taped interviews provided an entirely new concert experience that Urban Bush Women had not performed before. The mix of movement, technology, and performance theater proved to be a perfect mechanism through which to energetically explore the topic of hair from the perspective of African American women. Using video to highlight highly personal disclosures, juxtaposed against narratives of Zollar’s personal life and choreography that explored creative manifestations of real life happenings organically fused the disparate elements into a cohesive approach. The unique element of community engagement evidenced through personal and creative storytelling illuminated Urban Bush Women’s grounding in community.

The vignettes in HairStories follow an arc designed to initiate dialogue. The first segments merge memory with humor to ease the audience into the sensitive territory of race, gender, and identity. At the heart of the first arc is a character called the Dr. Professor, who opens the piece (she returns in four later scenes: “Dr. Professor, An Elaboration of the Hair Paradigm,” “Nappology 101,” “Genesis of the Badass,” and the final house party segment, which is not titled). The first vignette begins with a muted stage and a single spotlight that traces the entrance of the Dr. Professor, who is dressed in dark slacks and a sweater. The six dancers behind her are dimly lit, somewhat in the shadows, though their movement can be clearly seen. The costumes, designed by Tasha Monique Carter, are unmatched and all designed for ease of movement. The dancers wear loose fitting pants or skirts with slits up the sides and shorts underneath. One woman wears a fitted t-shirt, another wears a bra-top, while the rest sport tank
tops, some loose, some fitted. The fabric for the costumes combines black silk with a textured gold. The material is somewhat glittery, but combined with the black looks muted, not flashy.

The Dr. Professor enters, not as a dancer, but as a master of ceremony. Her role is to give context to the movement, the personal recollections, and the vignettes that together are *HairStories*. She articulates an analysis of race, suggesting that it is a social construction not an irrefutable truth. Her opening statement lays out a premise that a hierarchy exist in America, one in which Caucasians are the dominant culture. By this analysis, white people are considered the norm, while all other racial groups are considered “other,” “aberrant.” What Dr. Professor suggests is that people of color routinely have to define and redefine themselves within a culture that surrounds them, but often does not reflect their interests or experiences.

Dr. Professor makes literal the punctuated rhythms of the dancers who often share the stage with her. Her character is primarily an educator; she introduces terms and concept to the audience but she does not attempt to be objective. Her point of view, combined with just enough fire to make her point, occasionally crosses her into the penetrating incisiveness of a preacher. While her speech is peppered with academic jargon, she manages to avoid theoretical wordiness. The dancers behind her act as a chorus, complimenting the Dr.’s diatribe with simple, clear gestures, which ground the headiness of the esoteric concepts. The Dr. Professor provides a theoretical perspective, connecting African American women’s hair to race and gender mores in America.

The next Dr. Professor section, “Dr. Professor, An Elaboration of the Hair Paradigm,” investigates the “good” hair “bad” hair construction. She is accompanied by a single dancer who vacillates between labored sautés and dynamic lunges, ostensibly pointing out that both are challenging constructed movements of which the sautés are meant to look effortless. The dance underscores the Dr. Professor’s academic framework, which examines how race and gender are also arbitrary constructions. In two of the other vignettes featuring the Dr. Professor, “Nappology 101” and “Genesis of the Badass,” she examines the language that describes hair. In “Nappology 101,” she uses the word “nappy” as an example of an unfavorable descriptive term typically used only for African American hair. She also introduces “reappropiation,” taking what has been used negatively and making it positive. The Dr. Professor goes further with this exercise in “Genesis of the Badass.” Here, she and the dancers define “hair-related” and accompany this act with strong movement—strident postures and bold sweeps on the floor.
The tough and focused tone of the section accents the work necessary to challenge prejudice. The Dr. Professor final speaking role is at the beginning of the final vignette. She gives a speech about “freedom hair,” hair which is no longer tied to limitations of race and gender, but instead embraces artifice and personal style as the sole concern.

Along with the Dr. Professor’s educational approach, humor is a continuous presence in the early scenes. The “Hot Comb Blues” suite, in particular, details overwrought childhood angst about hair care. Video segment participants in “Women Talk Hair,” and “Back in the Day,” echo the wit of these scenes with funny comments. One African American woman in “Women Talk Hair” describes how her hair is so tightly curled that it looks like a cap on her head after washing. However, if she braids it and then combs it out, her hair is quite long. She adds that this would be confusing for white people. In “Back in the Day,” one African American woman laughingly describes how though chemicals for hair straightening are called “perms,” they should be called “temporaries.” Another African America women smiles as she shares how as a child she was taught to pat rather than scratch, to tie one’s hair down and sleep “pretty,” and to keep from sweating lest the hair on the back of the neck begin to re-curl.

However, some of the participants’ remembrances indicate more profound memories. In “Women Talk Hair,” a young African American woman tells of the strength and vibrancy her hair gives her. Another describes her very “nappy” hair and how her decision to get dreadlocks was political. She also shares how her mother was disappointed, feeling that dreadlocks made her daughter look less beautiful by emphasizing her “nappy” hair. “Women Talk Hair” and “Back in the Day” both feature community participants telling hair stories relating their feelings about self and family while also highlighting racial and gender issues important to HairStories’ political message. What these videos make clear is that feelings of empowerment and self-esteem are tied to hair just as the opinions of loved ones factor into personal tales. These vignettes create a general sense of how common and relatable hair troubles are, while also describing some of the specificity of African American female hair culture.

Zollar ends the “Back in the Day” video segment by describing her reaction to her hair treatment in a suite called the “Hot Comb Blues.” This begins the next vignette, the first all-dance section of the work. The “Hot Comb Blues” is followed by the “Knee Lock Militia” and the “Tender Headed Dilemma.” These segments physicalize the trauma for a little girl who needs to have her hair done. Like the previous video segment, “Back in the Day,” humor is a
pervasive tool used to undercut tension. These little girls are spirited, scrappy, and determined as they attempt to retain control of their heads and avoid the pain of being groomed. The final selection is “Gotta Itch It, Can’t Scratch It Shuffle,” which follows the now-adult characters as they pat their hair, rather than risk a scratch, which could undo their “do.” Though the enactments of hair treatment are humorous, these segments highlight the reality of the physical pain endured by girls—burns from hot combs and chemicals, the hurt of hair pulled and pressed, the care required to keep the hair styled—all of which inspired a great deal of fear about the whole process.

Finishing off the initial arc, four short theatrical vignettes, “The Church of What’s Happening Now With Yo’ Head,” “Hair Hell 1 & 2,” “Jeannie Jones Johnson,” and “The Williams Sisters” illustrate cultural aspects of hair. With a light touch, these scenes articulate a smattering of beliefs, experiences, and pop culture attitudes that shape what hair signifies. The first segment called “The Church of What’s Happening Now With Yo’ Head,” connects hair to spirituality. After the church scene, HairStories switches gears to showcase another of the complications facing African American women through their hair. “Hair Hell Moment #1” depicts a scene in which a crowded elevator (mostly full of white passengers) scrutinizes the hair of the one black passenger in front. Yet, when the passenger looks back at the other riders, they all freeze as if they had not been looking at her. Following this, “Hair Hell Moment #2” features the same woman riding the elevator with other African American women. This time the atmosphere is much more confrontational. The passengers tell the woman with short hair that she needs a comb (eventually this is sung to her by the elevator chorus) and that she looks like a man. The final segment of the three is a mock talk show hosted by Jeannie Jones Johnson, (played by Zollar). The talk show format introduces a note of silliness into the piece, employing humor as a means to control the tempo. Though the tone of this section is light, some heavier concepts are introduced. One vignette indicates the importance of hair in African cultures, while the other looks at tension around hair which masks the deeper racial issues associated with hair. Yet, humor undercuts these segments, keeping the piece from becoming heavy-handed.

The final scene of the first arc features two women performing as tennis players. As the dancers mime a very competitive game, Zollar reads a review from the Village Voice discussing how the Williams’ sisters get under the skin of the largely white tennis world. Their hair is, of course, part of the issue. The beaded hair indicates a radical difference from what a female
tennis player “should” look like. Tennis, it is implied, is a sport of gentleman and ladies, upper-class, the elite. When sports writers uphold this illusion by describing the Williams sisters as “animalistic” and “amazons.”, it is not just attitudes about race, but gender (in a limiting vision of femininity) that is being maintained. The initial arc creates a vocabulary for dialogue, uses humor to defuse tension, and demonstrates the pervasiveness of hair in cultural life. Together these vignettes create a welcoming atmosphere to explore the heated topics of race and gender.

The next group of vignettes, the video segment “Grief,” “Zollar Sisters,” and “Madam C.J. Walker,” take viewers deeper into more complex and challenging subject matter and comprise the second phase of the HairStories arc. In the video segment “Grief” and the “Zollar Sisters” vignette individuals share stories of painful hair experiences that leave a lasting mark on their bodies and psyches. Together, these hair stories provide another layer to American history, demonstrating the personal toll of race and gender inequality in this country.

The video vignette titled “Grief” marks a shift in HairStories after the buoyant energy of “Genesis of a Badass” and “The Williams Sisters.” In fact, the majority of the scenes up to this point offer humor in equal measure to sadness. “Grief,” on the other hand, begins a series of interviews that personalize the toll of inequality. Included in this segment is the voice of a woman who loses her hair to illness. This is the first mention of those who have illness-centered hair stories. Though HairStories does not further investigate this experience, it is enough to demonstrate the change in tone. It is as though the piece is offering itself to the widest audience possible, even as HairStories moves into the most intimate vignette of the work, “The Zollar Sisters.”

The most personal revelation from Zollar, “The Zollar Sisters,” is an autobiographical account that lies at the root of HairStories. This is a story about Zollar, her sister, and the differences in their hair. The dance between the sisters shows the complications that arise in sisterly relationships when physical appearances differ between siblings, creating an inferior vs. superior relationship. One sister is defensive, feeling ugly and ignored because of the hair she was born with while the other sister is guarded and unsure, feeling guilt over being honored for something she had nothing to do with. The sibling rivalry that results from the different treatment the girls receive over their hair only serves to emphasize their equally intense dedication to one another.
“The Zollar Sisters” vignette concludes with Zollar saying, “I cut my hair because I wanted to see the world through my sister’s eyes.” With this compelling metaphor, *HairStories* reaches into the center of hair politics and its divisive role concerning individuals, families, and communities. Doing so highlights the power of hair – the “good” hair / “bad” hair divide and how an individual’s life is marked by this hierarchy. “The Zollar Sisters” also serves to emphasize the privileging of perspective in *HairStories*. Zollar cuts her hair to see the world as her sister does then subsequently creates an entire work around the issue and invites the audience to attempt to recognize another’s experience. Ultimately, this vignette underscores the essence of the piece—to strive to see the world from another’s perspective in order for genuine social and political change to occur.

*HairStories* continues with a video segment, which shows a hand addressing a letter to Madame C.J. Walker. Personal information about how Walker came to be such a successful hair entrepreneur is shown in power-point bullets. Zollar reads a letter about how ambivalent she feels toward Walker. She describes wonderful childhood memories immersed in the “girl culture” of hair and how she respects that Walker was a successful black woman who wanted to help others. Yet, Zollar also expresses her feeling that Walker’s products are at the heart of black self-hatred. Zollar critiques Walker yet is cognizant that Walker most likely had the best intentions waylaid by the many challenges on the road to being a successful black woman in America. This scene highlights the paradox examined in *HairStories*—that behind nearly every African American hair story lies a deeper story of racist and sexist practices. The “Madam C.J. Walker” vignette investigates the past, looking to history as a way to understand the current racial politics. The ambiguity of the scene suggests that there are no easy answers in the quest to understand the present.

The final vignette in the most serious arc of *HairStories* returns once more to childhood. Zollar plays the part of a young girl, bouncing a ball with her friends and making up silly rhymes. After her friends leave, Zollar is confronted by her Aunt Vel who asks her, "how you gonna be happy with your hair all nappy?” Aunt Vel’s question leads Zollar to reminisce about all she happily remembers from her childhood. The Aunt Vel segment marks the conclusion of the most intimate of *HairStories* tales. These scenes use personal stories to create context for a larger history. In particular, the scenes demonstrate the necessity of wrestling with the past on a very personal level to be able to have an honest discourse about race and gender. The closing of
the middle arc in *HairStories* offers the final transition from work that is equal parts movement and text to the ending segment in which dance is the focus and dialogue is used sparingly. The final arc segment finishes with a celebratory house dance, showing the possibilities inherent in dance to connect individuals and surpass what can be achieved alone. The concluding section works to cultivate a release, meant to stimulate a collective response. Dance, *HairStories* suggests, provides a unique language allowing individuals to create and connect to the vibe, an energy which transcends the feelings of alienation and the differences that divide to be able work toward a more equitable future. Redemption through a communal connection is possible in this shared space. Dr. Professor introduces the final scene before merging into the chorus of dancers. It is a fitting closure for a character that has led the audience to a finale where the power and pleasure of working with community is evident.

Zollar’s commitment to community is evident in *HairStories* as it is with much of her repertory. Zollar’s decision to use her company and her choreography on the dance stage to uplift those who come in contact with her work continues the work of all the communities that Zollar has been influenced by. From her upbringing, to African American choreographers and scholars who have preceded her, Zollar has been immersed in the history that has fought for the freedom of African Americans and for liberation of all. Through *HairStories*, Zollar shares her method of engaging audiences to share her perspective on American history and present reality. Using Werner’s framework, the blues impulse offers the first opportunity to examine how *HairStories* works.
CHAPTER TWO

The Tragicomedy of the Blues Impulse

In *HairStories*, Urban Bush Women depict the challenges that African American women confront by examining black women’s relationship to their hair. From this perspective, the piece investigates the often painful and laborious process of getting one’s hair done, and the pressure (both subtle and overt) that women face in the seemingly simple decision of how to wear their hair. Through this, *HairStories* comments on the differences in treatment that women experience depending on their hair texture and length and in doing so, *HairStories* raises the issue of what motivates hair choices. The piece suggests that the pressure to undergo painful hair treatment has been caused by prejudicial attitudes of race and gender, while not discounting personal choice as a reason to alter one’s appearance. Moreover, *HairStories* explores how hair rituals have shaped African American culture and bonded generations of women. *HairStories* celebrates hair as a distinctive element that allows for personal expression, while also drawing together African American female community. The conflation of positive and negative hair experiences in *HairStories*, makes for a nuanced picture of the joy and sorrow of African American female life. This complexity, evident in the little girls’ shared stories, evokes a sense of strength through pain…a blues impulse.

*HairStories* uses videotaped interviews and autobiographical vignettes as a way to bring personal recollections about hair to the stage. Together, the memories create a work that shows the tragedy, comedy, and the ambiguity that shapes these women’s lives. The piece hints at the toll that racist and sexist attitudes have had on African American women while also exhibiting the strength, creativity, and passion that has sustained these women in spite of adversity. Ultimately, *HairStories* illustrates the power of finding one’s voice—and a cathartic release—within the pain of personal experience, thereby using their expression as a means of survival. For the characters of *HairStories*, this survival emerges from an aesthetic of the blues.

To Werner, the blues impulse aims to represent an aspect of African American culture that has developed as a means to express painful circumstances, while validating the individual
by reaffirming their existence. Inspired by Ralph Ellison’s writings on the blues, Werner argues that:

For Ralph Ellison, the blues present a philosophy of life, a three-step process that can be used by painters, dancers, or writers as well as musicians. The process consists of (1) fingering the jagged grain of your brutal experience; (2) finding a near-tragic, near-comic voice to express that experience; and (3) reaffirming your existence…Singing the blues doesn’t reaffirm the brutal experience, it reaffirms the value of life… A lot of times the blues are mostly about finding the energy to keep moving (Werner, 69-71).

Thus, the blues allow for the expression of pain, confusion, or even hilarity amidst feelings of powerlessness or alienation. Raw or molded, these feelings are mined and expressed to provide an outlet for the energy of the experience. A catharsis results from the expression, allowing the artist to find a balance between the suffering and laughable absurdity that shadows much of the human experience. The act of conveying the blues affirms one’s existence and ability to rise above woeful circumstances. Whether operating through the individual or collective, the blues (through the process of expression and reaffirmation) engenders personal, even group validation.

As Werner describes, the blues impulse operates in three parts. The first is to excavate the traumatic or confusing occurrence, exploring emotional parameters. From the practice of searching the experience, the person finds a voice to express what has occurred. Finding that voice sets a tone which conveys the humor and horror of the experience. Finally, through the act of using one’s personal pain and finding a manner of expression, a catharsis occurs and one’s humanity is reaffirmed. The blues demonstrates the individuals triumph over painful circumstances. Though the experience may be burdensome, the act of expression asserts the artist’s ability to continue on in the face of adversity. Sharing the experience emphasizes the strength and fortitude of the person who is working through the blues impulse (Werner 69-71).

HairStories illustrates the blues impulse’s naming and expression of one’s challenging experience by portraying several re-created memories from Zollar’s childhood. These hair-related autobiographical vignettes are especially concerned with the assorted messages she received from her family, her community, and society about love, acceptance, and choice. These vignettes are a mix of humor and sadness, aptly representing the conflated feelings that accompany the hair stories of many African American women.

While humor is used to voice an element of the experience of having one’s hair done, it is also a traditional tactic employed by African Americans to endure prejudicial treatment. In
HairStories, the “Blues Suite” illustrates the comic-tragic voice through four short scenes of girls struggling with having their hair arranged. The “near-comic” voice provides a humorous childhood perspective of the painful process of styling hair. Zollar depicts young girls jerking, twitching, and attempting to escape hair grooming, illustrating the physically resonant memories that accompany getting one’s hair done. These scenes balance what the blues impulse suggests is the tone necessary to keep oneself intact in the midst of deplorable circumstances.

Along with the voice of humor, HairStories also examines the harmful sentiments that are communicated through the metaphor of hair. Based on arbitrary physical values, these are messages that compromise one’s feeling of self-worth, ability, and power. HairStories uses examples of childhood to illustrate the sense of being overwhelmed and helpless particularly well. The first of two vignettes that will be utilized to illustrate the use of tragedy in the blues tradition is the “The Zollar Sisters,” which portrays the challenges between sisters who are judged differently based on their hair. The dance between the sisters depicts the short-haired sister’s defensiveness. She moves cagily covering her ears and keeping her gaze on the floor. Her sister watches uncertainly, then is met with resistance as the sisters wrestle with what bonds and separates them. The second vignette begins with the dancers portraying children as they play a game, make up rhymes, and bounce a ball. The scene then depicts a conversation between Zollar and her Aunt Vel and demonstrates the complicated messages that children receive about acceptance. In this case, the discussion is about hair, but suggests the larger task of understanding childhood memories from an adult perspective. Collectively, the “reaffirmation of existence” is demonstrated by these vignettes that make up HairStories—they function to tell the story of a group of women who, despite physical and psychological pain, have found a voice and power to express their blues experience.

Taken together, many of the childhood vignettes in HairStories use the blues impulse to articulate the complicated relationship women have with their hair and, by extension, their experience of racism and sexism within the context of African American female culture. This demonstrates the ways in which heartbreak and humor co-exist. Ultimately, the blues impulse facilitates a deeper appreciation of how expressing the pain and comedy of individual experience can validate one’s life. Through shared stories, HairStories endeavors to validate multiple experiences, and in doing so, creates a community.
HairStories excerpts were performed on Thursday, September 6, 2001 at the World Trade Center Plaza as part of “Evening Stars OnStage.” Ominously, this would be the last of this series due to the events of 9/11. Reviewed by Anna Kiesselgoff in the New York Times on September 10, 2001, the program was a double ticket with Rennie Harris Puremovement. She writes, “Excerpts from Ms. Zollar’s recent ‘HairStories’ used black women’s hair as a symbol for the trials of being both black and a young girl. Mothers who inflicted pain on their daughters by combing or straightening so-called nappy hair were doing what they thought best” (NYT 9/10/01). Kiesselgoff captures one of the central conflicts that exist within HairStories – that is of the painful legacy of battered self-esteem inflicted by mothers on their daughters. While HairStories illustrates several episodes of the humorous side of little girls attempting to escape adult attempts to groom them, it underscores the larger question of why mothers felt compelled to inflict pain on their daughters in the quest for beauty. Moreover, it is not just the relationship between mothers and daughters that are marked by this pain. Through the blues impulse, HairStories demonstrates that the relationships between sisters bear the burden of this inflicted hurt as well.

The complicated messages that African American girls get from loved ones about their hair can be traced to enslavement. Because of slavery, hair became an indicator of race in America, along with skin color and facial features, and justified possession of African Americans as property. However, in West Africa, hair meant something quite different. In fact, many West African cultures place great importance on hair. In their book, Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America, authors Ayana D. Byrd and Lori L. Tharps describe the multiple signifiers of hair amongst African cultures, including age, status, or religious affiliation. Community leaders often had the most elaborate styles. Across cultures, neglected or untidy hair was a sign of depression or illness. However, after enslavement, slave owners used hair to communicate a different message. Enslaved people often had their heads shaved as a way to diminish both their individuality and their connection to their past. Dehumanized and compared to animals as a means to justify slavery included describing the enslaved Africans’ (and later African Americans’) hair as wool. Enslaved people that had hair similar to that of white Americans might have more opportunities than those who did not. The advantages could include better work placement (house versus field), or closer proximity to freedom through passing as white. Favoritism for those with lighter skin and straighter hair created a belief system, which
passed from generation to generation because it could mean an easier existence for the individual with such attributes. As the texture of hair could determine quality of life, individuals turned to changing their hair in effort to improve their experience (Byrd and Tharps 2, 12-20).

Within this realm, mothers grooming their daughters’ hair passed on a complicated message of love for their daughters as they altered their appearance from its natural state. In the article, “Hair Texture, Length, and Style as a Metaphor in the African-American Mother-Daughter Relationship,” authors Greene, White, and Whitten write: “For some African-American mothers, concerns about the adequacy of their daughter’s hair and demeanor reflect more basic and practical concerns. These concerns are often about how their daughter’s acceptance by the dominant culture as well as the African American community will be facilitated or undermined by her physical appearance (Greene, White, and Whitten 174). The mixed message of love and pain that African American women receive about their hair reflects the agonizing history of enslavement and its subsequent repercussions. Mothers and daughters continue to battle the internalized messages of inferiority that originated during enslavement. Yet, as we will see in HairStories, Zollar uses humor as a method of surviving such deplorable circumstances.

In fact, throughout the work of Urban Bush Women, humor is often used alongside tragedy as a demonstrator of personal agency and as a form of resistance. Zollar’s use of wit while telling painful stories connects her to a similar principle grounded in African art. In “African Art in Motion,” Robert Farris Thompson speaks to personal and representational balance writing, “…showing the necessity of persons of caprice and humor within the shaping of human vitality. We must accept composure and control, but not at the price of humor—the gift of refusal to suffer” (Thompson 22). This “refusal to suffer” marks humor as a crucial survival tool. Hence, the long history of African Americans using humor to combat tragic circumstances signifies the sustainment of a fundamental African value that endured from enslavement to the present.

Another artist who often uses humor to add levity to otherwise abysmal conditions is Toni Morrison, an author from whom Zollar draws inspiration. A short scene in Toni Morrison’s novel Jazz depicts what could be read as a family in the most desperate of circumstances and further supports the fundamental necessity of laughter for survival. Morrison writes,
Violet was reminded of True Belle, who entered the single room of their cabin and laughed to beat the band. They were hunched like mice near a can fire, not even a stove, on the floor, hungry and irritable. True Belle looked at them and had to lean against the wall to keep her laughter from pulling her down to the floor with them. They should have hated her. Gotten up from the floor and hated her. But what they felt was better. Not beaten, not lost. Better. They laughed too, even Rose Dear shook her head and smiled, and suddenly the world was right side up. Violet learned then what she had forgotten until this moment: that laughter is serious. More complicated, more serious than tears (Morrison 113).

As the quote from Jazz suggests, humor is often more intricate and profound than drama. Humor is present in an overwhelming proportion of Urban Bush Women’s dance. Perhaps because comedy is not automatically associated with contemporary dance, critical attention has overlooked the role that wit plays in the work of Urban Bush Women. However, the sassiness, satire, and irreverent style that is evident in so many of the company’s work is equally important to understanding Urban Bush Women’s tactics.

Perhaps humor is present throughout Urban Bush Women’s work because it demonstrates the long standing African American tradition of using wit to survive American life. Mel Watkins writes, “Black Americans, I might add, often joke about the hypocrisy of American society as well as racism and the raft of outrageous stereotypes that racists have concocted” (Watkins 26). Watkins continues: “Black humor most often satirizes the demeaning views of non-blacks, celebrates the unique attributes of black community life, or focuses on outwitting the oppressor – as it were, ‘getting over’” (Watkins 29). Watkins is describing the comic voice of the blues impulse. He explains how humor can keep tragic element of the blues from becoming overwhelming, and also provides a source of community connection. HairStories questions the prejudicial system that values straight hair above other textures. Yet, with humor, the work celebrates how getting one’s hair done creates and sustains community. Laughter provides a physical release and is evidence that life’s challenging experiences have not proved overwhelming. Another of Urban Bush Women’s piece, Batty Moves, demonstrates the agency that humor provides, situating African American women in a position to reclaim historically denigrated areas of the body—the hips and buttocks—through dance.

To express the experience of using humor within the context of the blues impulse, Urban Bush Women’s piece, Batty Moves, illustrates the often used humorous style that Zollar and her
company employ to tackle challenging and potentially divisive subject matter. As a precursor to *HairStories, Batty Moves* was originally presented in 1995 and then revamped in 1998. *Batty Moves* was inspired by the story of Saartjie (Sara) Baartman (1790-1815), also known as the "Hottentot Venus." She was an African woman put on display in London and later Paris to exhibit her buttocks (Gottschild 150). Zollar begins each *Batty Moves* performance by sharing the tragic story of Saartjie Baartman with the audience. The piece then goes on to celebrate the *derrière*, using strong, virtuosic dancing, funny exchanges among the dancers between solo performances, and by finishing with clever personal raps. The women wear bra tops, spandex shorts, and white t-shirts tied around their waists, allowing the buttocks and hips to be accentuated without being objectified. Though the piece, Zollar has managed to inform the audience of the origins of the piece, honor Baartman, and reclaim a part of the body that for black women has been degraded and fetishized. As dance scholar Ananya Chatterjea writes:

> Zollar’s response – not a response at all in the sense of a reaction—witty, sarcastic, creative, and empowering, aesthetic and political at once, presents these women as complex human beings. They are subjects in control of the politics of representation, not objects upon whom it is thrust…The piece thus simultaneously addresses histories of abuse of Black peoples and the sexual exploitation of Black women in particular, challenges the reduction of women to their sexual parts, actively creates a different aesthetic and performs claims for the redefinition of beauty. This does not make light of the stereotype, nor deny the havoc it has wreaked, but rather disallows the further internalization of that history and thus refuses it power to cause further damage (Chatterjea 458).

With humor, Urban Bush Women are able to exhibit material that might otherwise overwhelm and alienate audiences. Zollar and the company share the story of Baartman, and examine how the attitudes that allowed Baartman to be treated as she was, continue to persist to the present. Much of the reclamation comes through movement, as the dancers prioritize steps showcasing the backside and pelvic girdle over movement of the center and limbs.

In a similar way, *HairStories* employs humor to challenge racially determined physical stereotypes but also to describe the specificity of cultural rituals that have developed around African American hair. While the work illustrates both the positive and negative culture of hair care, many of the actual rituals (such as patting the hair instead of scratching after a permanent) appear in a humorous light. Assuredly, the centrality of humor in Urban Bush Women’s work
cannot be overlooked. It is a powerful agent of change that allows otherwise taboo subject matter to be exhibited before a broad audience. With pieces such as Batty Moves and HairStories, Urban Bush Women has created a body of material that might otherwise repel audiences without the use of wittiness. In fact, the “Blues Suite” vignette in HairStories provides a prime example of the use of humor to transform painful experiences into a source of community connection—a blues impulse function.

In HairStories, the section entitled “Blues Suite” finds the comic-tragic voice by featuring the dancers acting as young girls having their hair done (or perhaps more accurately, attempting to avoid this fate). The first scene, “Hot Comb Blues,” is accompanied by a recording of James Brown as the women dance in unison, miming being burned by hair irons and having their hair pulled…they even yell “owee” for emphasis. The women move across the stage in two loose lines, repeating a combination of a low squats leading into a bent knee turn; there is also an isolation effect in the head, neck and shoulders used to emphasize their hair being pulled to which the dancers twitch in response. The women all end in place, facing the audience, holding their heads, knees quivering.

The lead-in to the “Hot Comb Blues” features video interviews of women sharing their recollections of having their hair done with a hot comb. They remember the steam from the comb and the top of their ears and scalp being burned. One woman adds that back in the day, no matter what one’s skin color, the tops of the ears of all African American girls were pink, like a tattoo from the hot comb. Even in Toni Morrison’s Jazz there is a scene depicting the scalding potential of the hot comb. As main character Violet does the hair of a customer, the two women become involved in a spirited conversation about men and women until the women getting her hair done exclaims, “That’s my ear, girl! You going to press it too?” (Morrison 14). So, as the women in “Hot Comb Blues” jerk and twitch their way through the piece, the audience has a picture of the effect of the menacing hot comb on these young girls. The effect of the six dancers dancing in unison represents the commonality of the hot comb experience. Another common occurrence is that of youngsters and adults fighting through the process of hair grooming, which is shown in the next vignette.

As the “Knee Lock Militia” takes their places, four women stand in a vertical line, pressing their knees and elbows together in unison. One woman takes on the characteristics of a pouty child. She lets her long hair loose, stomps to the line of women, and drops into a seated
position in front of the first woman. The adults begin to comb and simultaneously wrestle with
the little girl as her hair is worked through. The screaming child manages to escape at one point,
her terror evident, but they catch her and subject her to the comb-out once more. The child
speaks as the four hairdressers freeze. They hold the space with one arm extended over their
heads as if to strike, while the other hand ready to comb. They are in a ready stance to either
catch, hold, or continue to process the hair. The little girl speaks about the daily hair battles
between her and her mother. She is convinced that her mother strengthened herself every night
just to be ready to “squeeze the hell out of her.” The piece ends with all dancers, women and
child, hanging their heads, torsos dropped, and arms dangling, looking completely spent.

The battle between mother and daughter displays the amount of energy and attention that
is required to maintain the standard of beauty. From the child’s perspective, this section
characterizes an almost frenzied need by mothers to tame their daughter’s hair. The frantic
action goes beyond keeping one’s child groomed, because if it were so, young boys would have
similar stories. Rather, the battles between mother and daughter reveal the complexity of such
relationships. Mothers want the best for their daughters, want to protect their girls and help them
avoid rejection. Yet, in doing so, the mothers depicted in HairStories are willing to hurt their
daughters. Through both physical means (painful grooming) and psychologically (being told
that their natural state is not good enough), mothers often inadvertently diminish their daughters’
sense of worth. It is a peculiar experience to be hurt by those who love us to avoid pain from
the outside world. Yet, suggesting the commonality of the challenging relationships that often
exist between mother and daughter, humor is the voice of expression for this vignette. The
comic element of the blues impulse captures how relatable the experience of a mother-daughter
battle is, whether over hair or otherwise.

Following this, the third part of the “Blues Suite” is entitled “The Tender Headed
Dilemma.” Another dancer embodying a child character wears red-one piece pajamas with feet.
Her hair has a large comb stuck in it. She is in tremendous pain and seems powerless to stop it.
Lurching across the stage, at one point she falls and rocks on her abdomen. Finally, another
dancer arrives with a large towel – she assists, prodding and pulling the little girl off the stage.
Following the little girl leaving, the “Gotta Itch It, Can’t Scratch It Shuffle” begins. First, one
dancer moves across the floor doing extended leg turns, seemingly as a distraction from the pain
on her scalp. A second dancer joins her, concentrating on fast footwork to distract her from the
head pain. This continues with all the dancers taking turns at ignoring the pain. The comic voice of the blues impulse is evidenced by the dancers’ movements. The extreme effort exerted to avoid scratching one’s head is exaggerated for comic effect. As the dancers physicalize their struggle to pat, not scratch, they demonstrate the laughable absurdity of many beauty rituals.

In the “Hot Comb Blues” and “Gotta’ Itch It, Can’t Scratch it Shuffle” vignettes, the dancers confront painful aspects of having their hair done. In the “Knee-lock Militia” and “Tender-headed Dilemma” segments, the girl children are being wrestled into submission by their caregiver(s) as they clash over hair. While the underlying issue is girls suffering for beauty, the absurdity and thus relatability of these childhood experiences sets the tone. What links these segments to the comic voice is the use of exaggerated movement and facial expressions. Movement is the language of children, used as much if not more often than words, making for a more accurate picture of childhood responses. In *HairStories*, using humor through movement creates a catharsis for children who are otherwise powerless.

As such, much of the humor in *HairStories* is found in the remembrances and recreations of childhood memories. These stories remind the audience of the excitement and confusion of youth as the children attempt to navigate increasing complicated adult realities. Through these recollections, *HairStories* questions the parameters of freedom and asks if there are differences in experiences based on race and gender. Depictions of memory from a child’s perspective poignantly measure the cost to human dignity when freedom is not experienced equally. Using the voice of childhood shows the confusion that children face as they attempt to understand complex societal constraints, for children are not born with a concept of racial or gender inferiority or superiority, but are socialized into society’s norms. The practices of having their hair done, while told humorously through the voice and movement of three terrified “girl” characters underscores the painful experiences that leaves these children scared. Moreover, the use of the “near comic, near tragic” voice throughout *HairStories* is a means of employing the blues impulse to both survive the experience and have one’s sense of humanity validated.

Moving away from the relief of humor, the near-tragic voice of the blues impulse is evident in the section entitled “The Zollar Sisters.” Here Zollar, as herself (no separation between stage persona and self) tells of life with her sister whose hair is of a different texture than her own. She addresses the inequitable treatment that is visited upon her and her sister based solely on hair texture to detail the effects of how racism is enacted personally. The tale of
love lost between sisters demonstrates how the blues impulse functions to find a voice to express one’s experience. Having an outlet prevents the budding awareness of the pressures of adult life from becoming overwhelming.

Two dancers, one of which has long locks (Jawole), while the other has short hair, depict the love-hate relationship between sisters stemming from their hair. From off stage come series of pejorative names being yelled toward the women on stage. The audience hears names such as “steel-wool,” “wing-wop,” and “coo-coo-burr” being shouted. Defensively, the dancer with short hair covers one ear with her hand, seeming to block out the negative onslaught. While it is a common experience amongst children to taunt with names, in this case the racist undertones are apparent. Having one’s hair compared to steel wool, for example, conjures up an image of a harsh, abrasive cleaning tool and suggests that the opposite (thin, straight hair) is desirable. Notably, the short-haired dancer never looks up; her eyes stay rooted to the floor as she continues in a protective stance. Covering her ear is a resistant action, but her eyes suggest that she is not capable of changing the dynamics she is experiencing – it is the rebellion of a child. There is no real hope for a change of circumstance, but instead a need to affirm the experience, to reaffirm her humanity through her ability to move. Physically, she manifests the blues impulse. With her blocking gestures she shares the defensive, bodily pain of being targeted over her hair. However, her continuous motion indicates her ability to find a voice that will keep her from being overwhelmed. Finding a means of expression through movement validates her experience.

Though her resistance seems to underscore her defensive response and pronounce her aloneness, the connection between sisters is evident as the vignette continues. The short-haired dancer moves to the floor and begins turning frantically from side to side as though convulsing during a nightmare as the relentless name-calling continue. She rolls to her knees, holding her head in both hands. For the first time, the other dancer (until now only an observer) goes to her sister. Kneeling at her side, the long-haired girl waits quietly until her sister leaps into her arms. From the shadows, Zollar begins a monologue about the relationship between the sisters. She says:

Her hair wasn’t but that long. Me and my sister - Donna Rae and Willa Jo - as thick as thieves. Deep blood love – deeply in love, deeply at war. One has this thick, long head of hair that would make people “ooh” and “ahh” and the other, despite my mama trying everything, my sister’s hair wasn’t but that long.
Zollar’s speech articulates how intertwined the bodies, psyches, souls of the sisters are to one another. They are best friends and fiercest rivals. In such a complex bond, any perceived difference can throw the relationship off balance. Thus, Zollar’s line about her “mama trying everything” to get her sister’s hair to grow, suggest a likely painful and frustrating process of hair treatments for one sister and not the other. In *HairStories*, the sisters receive from their mother a painful introduction to a system of values based on beauty.

To demonstrate how challenging and frustrating it is for children to comprehend such a difficult lesson, the dancers continue to play out sibling angst through their movement. They separate, stand, and holding opposite arms to one another, begin going around in a circle – it is part play, part battle. They continue to push and pull one another in various partnering, even pulling one another’s hair. Finally, the long-haired dancer tosses her hair over her sister’s shoulder as if to share her lot. The short-haired dancer angrily pulls away and holds her sister in a pointed stare. It is a profound moment of childlike honesty played with precision by the dancers. The long-haired dancer wants her sister to stop hurting and so to share seems obvious. However, the disparaged child is on the receiving end of the knowledge that the world is an unfair place. No amount of her sister’s hair will salve that wound.

Perhaps most compelling about this vignette is that the vision of children wrestling with one another is ultimately their grappling with the illogical and subjective nature of beauty. Using the memory of how hair causes her and her sister unequal treatment, Zollar implies an end to childhood innocence in the realization that the world is not a fair place. Instead, Zollar reveals society’s judgmental nature, which places value on arbitrary things such as hair length and texture…things that are meaningless from child’s perspective. As children are socialized into a culture that places value on beauty tied to race or gender they are introduced to the influence of racist and sexist attitudes.

Zollar ends the scene by telling of how she cut off her hair as a political statement, but also to “be like my beautiful sister Donna, to see the world through her eyes.” Just as Zollar wanted to see the world through her sister’s eyes, so does she invite the audience to see the world from another perspective. It is not a stretch to suggest that she is asking the viewer to consider life with other eyes, other hair, another body. She is looking at difference, but underscoring the
point that we all benefit from considering another’s experience. In fact, it is the only way to undo the racist and sexist mores that influence our attitudes and behavior toward one another.

In terms of the blues impulse, sharing one’s brutal experience—in this vignette, two young girls’ struggle with their difference in hair texture—culminates in the audience seeing another’s point of view. This simple exchange validates the humanity of the person offering the story. While the hope for change is implicit, in terms of the blues impulse, it is enough to have found a voice to share the experience and reaffirm one’s existence, which is also evident in a later scene about “Aunt Vel.”

The final vignette used to demonstrate the blues impulse in *HairStories* is the story of Zollar and her Aunt Vel. In the scene, Zollar herself plays a young girl, dressed in a navy and white striped jumper with her hair divided into two small puffs on the top of her head. Surrounded by a chorus of her friends, Zollar repetitively bounces a ball. Five dancers circle around Zollar as though in a game of ring-around-the-rosy. As they turn, the dancers clap a rhythm and chant “pull it out zing, snap it back boom.” The dancers embody girlhood by moving unselfconsciously in their bodies. They are jubilant and a-rhythmic in their expression, echoing the sing-song chant.

The dancers stop to listen as Zollar uses poetry to tell of a memory of her Aunt Vel. Zollar describes a tree, outside her aunt’s house, which only blooms at night. Zollar says that the bush sings and when it does it reminds her of several female vocalists and her mother. After her friends leave, the young Zollar is left to be confronted by her Aunt Vel who questions Zollar on what is under her phantom do-rag. The off-stage chorus replies that “she cut it, she cut off all her hair.” Her aunt repeatedly asks her what she is going to do now, to which the chorus responds that she has a show, a dance. Looking and sounding perturbed, with her hands akimbo on her hips and her chest thrust forward, Aunt Vel asks, “Now how are you going to be happy, with your hair all nappy?”

Aunt Vel abruptly exits the stage, leaving Zollar alone. Positioned between the exchange between Aunt Vel and the offstage chorus, Zollar has been diminished. The jubilant youngster has been replaced by a crouched figure in a wide squat. She appears worried as she looks back and forth between her aunt and her friends. After her aunt leaves, Zollar begins to recover herself. She rolls her hips, then shoulders as though she is growing up before the audience. Now standing upright, she takes a firm wide leg stance, and assumes a direct gaze. She takes a step
toward the audience and with a lower pitched voice, absent of the sing-song quality she began the scene with. She repeats the earlier story she told her friends of her Aunt Vel saying, “Outside my Aunt Vel’s House. Protected Wilderness. Scraping quietness. There is one acacia tree that only blooms at night. The way that bush sings, in the dark, it reminds me of Sarah Vaughan, Billy Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and my mother’s blue-green-lavender hair. The way that bush sings, in the dark, it reminds me of blue-green-lavender hair, like my mama’s happy, nappy hair.” As she says the last line, she is once more a child, even pouty as she insists on her mama’s happy hair.

Perhaps her vacillation between child and adult is an indicator of the struggle between the sweet memories of her childhood and her limited agency as a child. Her Aunt Vel is associated with a wonderful memory of nature, all connected to feelings of home and family. However, Aunt Vel also provides a stern warning against Zollar’s natural hair. Zollar, as a child and as an adult, feels the alienation of being caught between two worlds. As a child, she treasures her friends and family and getting her hair done is one way to spend time with those she cares about. Yet, getting her hair done is painful and she is given the message that her natural hair is not attractive. As an adult, Zollar must sift through these memories and understand how to feel about her past. If she can determine how her past shapes her present, she may have more choices in everything from how she wears her hair to how she lives her life.

The scene elucidates the power of early memory, particularly as it shapes adult perceptions. Zollar has found a voice to share her childhood memories. Tightly curled locks are relegated to childhood silliness, subject matter to make up rhymes and games about, complete with sound effects (“pull it out, zing – snap it back, zoom”). Hair, in this context, is associated with the sweetness of nature, a beautiful tree, the quiet of night. Additionally, influential jazz voices of her childhood intermingle with the disputed memory of her mother’s tri-colored hair. Aunt Vel lends the only critical concern, a warning that hair is not just hair, but is tied to a deeper, darker history, one that Zollar and all her childhood friends will spend a lifetime parceling through to find a measure of the peace demonstrated in this simple reconstruction of a childhood memory.

As has been demonstrated, HairStories emphasizes the near-tragic voice in the stories recalling Zollar’s familial relationships. These scenes portray a serious tone in unveiling a blues aesthetic. The powerful relationship between HairStories and the blues impulse highlight that
African American hair stories are molded by gender and shaped by race. Often, the specific experience of having one’s appearance fashioned by forces outside of one’s control (in this case, hair) raises important questions about circumstance, personal choice, and living within our bodies. Certainly, this is the perspective and overriding concern of the work—to represent the experience of growing up black and female in America and how that affects one’s hair and by extension, body, mind, and spirit.

The echo of the blues that runs through *HairStories* shares the sadness of what has been lost in a society that supports gender and racial disparities. The grief that is shared with the audience paints the struggle to maintain a cohesive and healthy sense of self amidst a prejudicial society. Yet, the laughter that rings through the earlier pieces is indicative of the resiliency of children and suggests some range in choice of response to challenging experience. *HairStories* shows that blues and humor play a tremendously important role in the process of refusing to suffer.

Essentially, through the Aunt Vel segment, “The Zollar Sisters,” and “Blues Suite,” *HairStories* reveals how cultural practices are passed from one generation to the next, creating connection and continuity. However, these same rituals also serve to undermine self-esteem and create conflict within the next generation. Within a blues context, *HairStories* addresses racism inside the black community without losing the point of why intra-community racism exists. It is a particularly powerful example when demonstrated through young children – these youngsters are innocents being socialized in a system they must understand to survive.
CHAPTER THREE

Unpinning Convention through the Jazz Impulse

Through examining *HairStories* from a blues impulse, we see that Urban Bush Women use tales of girlhood to examine what motivates our hair choices. These childhood scenes hint at racist and sexist attitudes that underline why the girls must alter their hair and depict the spirited, confused, and often heart-breaking responses of the girls. As these girls grow into womanhood, it is likely that they will continue to face racism and sexism in American culture. Yet, growing older and becoming a woman presents new possibilities about addressing these issues. No longer bound to the powerlessness and alienation of childhood and of the blues impulse, young African American women can develop more assertive tactics for confronting oppression. For Zollar, these tactics hinge on knowledge.

Zollar’s belief that education is the key to overcoming the limitations that prevent the coming together of community is a consistent thread in much of Urban Bush Women’s work, including *HairStories*. To this end, Zollar introduced a character called Dr. Professor as a method of educating those in the audience who may not have an understanding of the cultural significance of African American hair. Zollar reveals, "I…thought about the character the Dr. Professor, that I needed a liaison between the world of people who didn’t know this culture of hair around African Americans” (Zollar interview, 2010). Zollar’s comment indicates that from the inception of *HairStories*, the piece was designed to bridge a gap in cultural knowledge. Both the gap and the cultural knowledge itself present complicated terrain. These are complex issues, requiring space to question, experience, and uncover multiple truths.

The vignettes featuring the Dr. Professor offer a revealing portrait of how race and gender are not fixed, but operate as constructions maintained by biased perception. Through language (speech, text, and movement) *HairStories* suggests, reflects these biases. The Dr. Professor and dancers facilitate an analysis of how we think, see, and speak about race and gender. In the work, jargoned racial diatribes are recited by Dr. Professor, who is accompanied by dancers punctuating key words. Moreover, gender is physically uprooted as the women perform an array of corporal and emotional states, ranging from strong and fierce to vulnerable and wounded in their performances. Consequently, the all-female cast complicates conventions of femininity by matching strength with grace, performing a full range of body capacities.
without limitations in form or technique. Both Dr. Professor and these moments of exploratory complexity reveal a second impulse…that of jazz.

The probing energy of the jazz impulse, the second example from Craig Werner’s musical framework, revolves around the continuous process of redefinition. An artist reworks his or her identity individually, as a community member, and in relation to those that have come before (Werner 132). The jazz impulse pushes for authenticity of self, within relationships and through knowledge of the past. This quest for constant reevaluation prevents repetition, stagnation, and the idle process of blindly following social conventions and patterns without question. In place of this toporific state, the jazz impulse champions redefining all thought processes in an effort to find more freedom and more truthful relationships to self, community, and the past. In society, the jazz impulse probes inequality to reveal how it manifests, so that it may be undone (Werner 132-136).

In art, the jazz impulse operates on three levels: through the individual, through the artist’s relationship with the community, and through a link to tradition. The jazz impulse requires that an individual continuously redefines selfhood—personal identity is subject to critique, readjustment, and accommodation in a quest to become more self-aware and knowledgeable. The same inquisitive spirit pushes the individual to evaluate their connection to their community and to be conscious about their connection to the past. The reassessment of self, community, and history extracts the most profound significance of how the present came to be. Therefore, what is garnered from the constant evaluation is an understanding of what produced the current reality and how this could be re-imagined for a different future. In *HairStories*, a piece that is bringing attention to sexist and racist attitudes, the spirit of the jazz impulse is particularly important so that the history and pervasiveness of this experience can be examined and a less prejudicial future envisioned. To that end, the piece embodies the jazz impulse by challenging and dismantling simple categorizations of race and gender.

In *HairStories*, five vignettes are used to explore the jazz impulse. Four of these scenes feature the Dr. Professor investigating language to demonstrate the continuous process of redefining self and the community. The descriptive language of hair is examined to assess the role that language has in determining identity and perception of others. When the Dr. Professor speaks of the language around hair, such as the “good” hair / “bad” hair division in “Phenomenology of Hair” or the word “nappy” in “Nappology 101,” she illustrates how
commonly used language carries prejudicial meaning that can shape an individual’s self-concept and their view of others.

In the other two vignettes featuring the Dr. Professor, dance and text work together to destabilize conventions in language and movement. In “Genesis of the Badass,” the Dr. Professor defines and reclaims pejorative words, using the jazz impulses manner of re-interpretation to find new meaning. The strident dance that accompanies this section amplifies the way the jazz impulse unsettles the status quo in order to topple assumptive models and present new ways of understanding. In “An Elaboration of the Hair Paradigm,” a dancer is in constant motion to illustrate the battle over identity when one’s gender or race is constructed as “other” in relation to the dominant culture. Physicalizing the push-pull tension is a particularly powerful way to demonstrate the how arbitrary the categorizations of race and gender are, and why they should be challenged.

In the final segment used to illustrate the jazz impulse, a reexamination of the past is explored through the complexity and ambiguity of Madam C. J. Walker. In an open letter to Walker, Zollar’s explains her respect for Walker who overcame extreme adversity to triumphantly navigate the business world as a successful entrepreneur. Walker’s achievements as an African American female business owner present a compelling and inspiring “rags to riches” story. However, the letter also reviles Walker for building her empire by selling hair straighteners, tools that Zollar feels capitalize on and exacerbate African American women’s abhorrence of their natural hair. This example embodies the jazz impulse’s questioning nature. Such inquiry is the soul of the jazz impulse—to push the process of redefinition of self, community and tradition.

HairStories provides an opportunity for the jazz artist to rework her identity. Through her presence as the narrator of the piece, Dr. Professor can be read as one element of Zollar’s own identity. Dr. Professor is the academic, the literal storyteller who represents Zollar’s artistic strategy to create a more egalitarian society. Through the guise of Dr. Professor, Zollar works within the system. In real life, too, Zollar uses academia to advance her art. She is a professor at Florida State University; she creates accessible art within a conventional medium—concert dance. Yet, within the roles, as academic or artist, she creates space for other aspects of her identity – African American, female, an activist, and someone who uses her position to uplift those around her.
The Dr. Professor character operates in a similar fashion. Zollar utilizes the Dr. Professor to examine perceptions of race and gender through the language of hair and movement of the body. The Dr. Professor acts as a lecturer, a teacher to the audience with the dancers acting as her punctuation. Her role as the narrator gives clarity, structure, and adult perspective. Through her lectures, defining terms, and uncovering meaning, Dr. Professor educates her viewers, while simultaneously strengthening community by creating a shared vocabulary.

The Dr. Professor’s concise interjections attempt to facilitate dialogue. There is a language barrier between those who need Dr. Professor’s candor and those who could understand HairStories without a guide, which makes conversation about racism and sexism from the perspective of African American women difficult. The Dr. Professor’s inclusion brings these two disparate communities together and creates the potential that a shared language could initiate meaningful dialogue between groups that do not have the same history, language, or experience. Zollar has spoken about how seriously the company began to undertake dialogic training after HairStories. Clearly the piece demanded this kind of intercessor to facilitate the conversation that HairStories hopes to create. While the Dr. Professor embodies the jazz impulses re-imagination of self and her work redefines community, she also re-envisioned the use of art and education for a new millennium audience.

As a link in the chain of tradition, the Dr. Professor embodies the legacy of African Americans using education and art as tools to combat racism. HairStories combines the artistry of the stage and the informative voice of Dr. Professor to continue anti-racism activism. As an example of the jazz impulse at work, Zollar uses education and art and by doing so, re-evaluates what worked in the past and reframes the methodology for a contemporary audience. So, she is linked to the history of activism by using these tools then pushes the technique further by placing the dialogue on the concert dance stage. Doing so moves the knowledge beyond an academic forum and into a popular one, expanding the potential audience.

Having a woman perform the role of the Dr. Professor adds a layer of complexity to HairStories. As a woman, Dr. Professor interrupts any images of authority that might be more easily associated with men. Her character is a doctor, a scholar, a professor, a teacher. It may not be shocking to see a female professor, as it is not unusual for a woman to pursue professional degrees, however, the jazz impulse requires conventions be challenged. In this case, the Dr.
Professor is challenging any ideology that accepts male expertise or authority more readily than that of a woman.

Furthermore, the Dr. Professor character is a mild jab at teachers who support an inaccessible scholarship that alludes to an ivory tower. Dr. Professor is somewhat stuffy. Her jargon-laced speech reflects that, while she is an expert, she is also a woman who may be supporting a system of higher learning that is not value-neutral and may in fact be representative of many of the hegemonic institutions that uphold racist and sexist limitations. The intimation that the Dr. Professor may be part of the problem is done with a light touch; scholars are not vilified (Zollar, after all, is a scholar in real life). Rather with tongue-in-cheek (note the silliness of Dr. and Professor as character’s name), Zollar hints that scholars are not infallible and that the education system bears some responsibility in attempting to engage an audience it is studying and using what is learned to improve lives, rather than fostering an environment that pursues knowledge which is inaccessible to anyone outside the field. Her affect encourages a review of the academy looking at inaccessible scholarship, while also demonstrating a way to work within the institution through a marriage with the arts. From the moment, the Dr. Professor takes the stage in *HairStories*, she works both within and outside the conventions of education, concert dance, and entertainment.

When the *HairStories* preamble begins the Dr. Professor moves across the stage with a business-like air, dressed in navy trousers and a sleeveless red turtleneck. She is introduced in bold letters on the projector screen as “Dr. Professor – the Nation’s Leading Expert in Nappology.” She is accompanied on the stage by six other dancers. Dr. Professor announces her intention for the evening:

Good Evening. The topic of my talk is the phenomenology of hair in African American culture. If we begin to examine the phenomenology of hair in African American culture, perhaps we will begin to understand the complex social economic dynamic that is perpetuated by values attached to race, class, and gender through the lens of a people who are existing in relationship to a dominant paradigm of a white power structure that influences all aspects of American life—thus leading to a construct of good hair and bad hair.

Her soliloquy is direct. While beginning her speech she starts to walk around. She stops—her first pose is fixed with one hand on her hip and the other arm extended upward. She points her finger to emphasize what she is saying. Women behind her, unmoving until now, all lift their arms and point their fingers to enunciate the point. They hold the pose as she moves on. She
crouches and mimes with her hands putting unseen objects in a box. The chorus of dancers holds their elbows up to each side, with hands extended, pointing to their hair. They pivot, shake their hips as the Dr. says “African American culture,” pivot back, and then hold up their hands in a questioning gesture as the Dr. says “perhaps.” As she says “understand” they point to their heads and as she says “complex” they and she begin to swim their arms downward as if digging deeply into something. The women’s arms are not uniform; everyone digs at their own pace. This foreshadows the personalization of hair stories…while there may be similarities within stories, individuals ultimately have their own tress tale to tell. They continue their digging motion until she says “attach,” when the dancers reach out with straight arms, clap their hands, and then clasp them. As she says, “race” the Dr. and the other dancers all rub a spot on their upturned forearm. For “class,” all stretch one arm high over their heads, while the other arm is reaching to the floor. “Gender” has the women crossing their hands over their pelvises. The Dr. follows this by pointing at the audience, surveying them with her finger. The dancers behind her exaggerate the motion, which, when involving the head, makes for an almost snake-like ripple through the body. They continue until they stamp in unison to “dominant paradigm.” The dancers follow with a deep curve of the back, hollowing through their bellies, and their arms forward. They stand rigid and salute as she says “America.” They then carve out boxes in the space in front of them. “Construct.” Dr. Professor lingers on the word “good” before “hair” and the dancers paint the air with long gentle strokes. As she says “bad hair,” the women all point and stare stage left, then jump away as they say “EWWW.” The stage goes black and a screen lights up: “HairStories.”

In her opening statement, the Dr. refers to the perspective of HairStories being, “…through the lens of a people who are existing in relationship to a dominant paradigm of a white power structure that influences all aspects of American life…” Thus, from the opening scene HairStories suggest that racial hierarchies exist in America. The jazz impulse edges the dialogue toward this type of opening, requiring such tension, even discomfort in effort to find new ways of addressing an old problem. Essentially, racial hierarchies in America must first be acknowledged before they can be challenged. Dr. Professor states it clearly, requiring that this consciousness be recognized before stepping further into how racial hierarchies have manifested (i.e. “good hair” and “bad hair”).

The Dr. Professor character verbalizes the undermining of race and gender that HairStories attempts. In her opening statement, the Dr. Professor articulates that HairStories
uses hair to examine race, class, and gender from the perspective of African American women who exist outside of the Caucasian, dominant American power structure. Her opening statement immediately (and literally) sets the stage that American culture is dominated by and routinely defined as Caucasian culture. Therefore, what is being presented through *HairStories* is an alternative perspective on American life. Individuals, through their stories and experiences are actively redefining themselves.

The clarity of the opening is done with a mindfulness of how different the culture of hair is between African Americans and other cultures, particularly that of Caucasians. The academic framework that the Dr. Professor introduces serves to influence the angle from which the rest of the piece should be interpreted. The choice to begin *HairStories* in this way represents a keen awareness of the difference in perception between cultures of the racism and sexism that African American women experience. Without the Dr. Professor’s initial statement, it is possible that the point of *HairStories* (essentially the experience of racial and gendered prejudice through the eyes of African American women) might be viewed as more a cultural curiosity from those outside a African American female perspective rather than an opportunity to explore race and gender hierarchies in American society.

The Dr. Professor acknowledges a hierarchy, establishes perspective, and initiates a dialogue about racist and sexist attitudes shaping American culture. As one of the storytellers in *HairStories*, she argues that individuals and communities are affected under a racial and gendered system that has been in operation since the establishment of America. Such a long history of racial and gender inequity in America reveals how challenging it is to interrupt any complex system of power, particularly one that is based on such slippery categorization as race. Grouping a people based on hair texture or skin color is perhaps the most unreliable, inconsistent way to categorize a group. Yet, African Americans have been determined on this basis. To investigate this issue, Dr. Professor further analyzes race and gender in “Dr. Professor, An Elaboration of the Hair Paradigm.”

In “Dr. Professor, An Elaboration of the Hair Paradigm,” the professor returns with one dancer who is lit with a soft yellow light against the otherwise darkened stage. Dr. Professor moves around as she speaks, while the lone dancer stands in first position and begins to jump sautés in place. The dancer moves from the balletic warm up jumps to long stride leaps, involving the arms and torso. She moves very dynamically, but stays in place. She returns to the
first jumps as the professor says, “Within the value constructs of African Americans there is an underlying identification with, and at the same time, a conflict of hatred of the dominant culture.” Dr. Professor repeats this for emphasis, then goes on to say: “In order to be accepted by the dominant culture there is a need by African Americans to subvert any characteristics that might be exclusively identified with the culture that is seeking assimilation. Thus, in this value construct the closer the identification to whiteness, the more potential for acceptance into white culture. And thus we have “good” hair – hair which is straighter and closer to how we have constructed whiteness. And whiteness is a construct just as blackness is a construct. And we have the opposite – blackness – “bad” hair, which is of course quite nappy.”

Meanwhile, the accompanying dancer vacillates between sautés and long stride leaps in place for three sets. As the professor speaks of the need for African Americans to subvert any characteristic not associated with whiteness, the dancer turns sideways to the audience, while circling her arms one at a time over her head ending with her hands on her buttocks. She continues circling backwards with small bunny hops, leading with her backside. This action alludes to another Urban Bush Women piece, *Batty Moves*, a work that addresses the female butt, ultimately reclaiming its right to exist as it is, rather than be hidden or changed to fit the aesthetic of the dominant power structure.

“Batty” is a Caribbean word celebrating the beauty of a woman’s backside and so reminds viewers that not all cultures place the same value on the bottom as Caucasian culture. Thus, the simple gesture of a woman placing her hands on her backside as she is jumping backwards introduces double consciousness. This term suggests that African Americans must exist within two realities, one that is set and defined by the dominant Caucasian hegemony and one that reflects the reality of African American values. The jazz impulse forces a reexamination of the culture that compels African American women to hide or change physical characteristics (buttocks or hair).

The dancer mimes a small box as the professor says “value construct,” after which she returns to her sautéing. The Dr. Professor speaks of good hair, while the dancer continues the ballet jumps though her hands begin to gesture long flowing locks. Her body appears split; neither action appears compatible or comfortable. The effort to fit the structure is obvious, though the dancer has a smile plastered across her face as she jumps. As the Dr. Professor moves to the construction of race, the dancer rubs the skin on her arm, the same motion done by
all the dancers in the first segment. Dr. Professor goes on to the construction of blackness, while the dancer returns to the energetic running leaps in place. She is no longer smiling as the Dr. Professor talks of bad hair. Rather her face has a look of determination and her breathing is audible. The dancer continues this while the light fades. The female dancer appears caged, as though trying to break out of something that is holding her back. Yet, in much the same way, she was “caged” in the ballet jumps, locked into a motion of arms and legs steeled in repetition. Her false smile and hidden exertion reveal its obvious construction. Through movement, the dancer is able to indicate the stress and discomfort required to deny oneself in effort to fit into any construction, be it race, gender, or body type.

The rendering of gender materializes in dance as the art is performed via the body. One of the key mechanisms of performing gender is the manipulation of the body in posture or stance, gesture, and gaze or focus. Using the examples of ballet and post-modern dance, (with respect to the many variations in all forms of concert dance and at the risk of oversimplifying) bodily, ballet may be considered the most hyper-feminine in Western culture. A preferred body type favoring long, lean lines which obscure the strength beneath, the privileging of graceful elegance in all movement, and a technique and choreography designed to present the beauty of the body at best angles to the audience. Post-modern dance often favors gender-neutral casting. Men and women are not locked into traditional roles or partnering (i.e. women can lift their partners, men can be led). The gaze is often internal – as the audience is rarely acknowledged unless it is meant to be ironic or to break the third wall. Urban Bush Women, in contrast, features women of various shapes and sizes, who exhibit strength and move boldly through space. The women of the company also demonstrate the lithe elements of ballet or the surprising partnerings of post-modern dance. The Urban Bush Women dancers often engage the audience with a direct gaze and don’t shy away from being entertaining. The subject matter is often grounded in literal subject matter versus the abstraction of post-modernism. The choreography of Urban Bush Women is created to service the message, rather than prioritizing a body type or specific technique.

Not being stymied by the limitations of the ballet body or post-modernism resistance to literal content has allowed Zollar to present another aspect of womanhood, arguably a more complex and realistic view of femaleness. As scholar Evelyn Newman Phillips writes in “Doing More Than Heads,” “African American women invent and redefine premises for attractiveness in
order to supplant stereotypical racist standards and to express themselves: Physically, culturally, and metaphysically, African American women beautify and create themselves in likenesses they deem fitting” (Phillips 38). The work of Urban Bush Women portrays women as strong and tender, confrontational and vulnerable, opinionated, while allowing space for multiple points of view and even ambiguity. Zollar and company shake up some specific conventions of the female body and the performance of gender through the language of movement. When the Dr. Professor returns in “Nappology 101” and “Genesis of the Badass,” she continues to demonstrate the power of spoken language and the oppressive elements which still functioning therein. However, embodying the jazz impulses, these two scenes investigate, redefine and ultimately use stigmatized language to initiate dialogue and transform negative self-concept.

When the vignette entitled “Nappology 101” begins, the Dr. Professor asks the audience to repeat “nappy hair” with her and then to yell out any other names for tightly curled hair that they may be familiar with. This gets much laughter from the audience. The call and response mechanism works to engage the audience, initiating dialogue. Some may have a lot to add about hair terms, for other’s the segment may be continuing to add new information to their understanding of the complexity of African American hair culture. With laughter, the segment serves to gently underscore the cultural differences based on race or gender. The lack of commonality between Caucasian and African American hair culture is one way place to examine why race inequities continue to exist and to matter in this country.

To explain the point of this exercise, the Dr. Professor describes the tactic as, “reappropriating the tools of the dominant culture – taking that which has been used against you and now claiming it as good. Or as we say in the vernacular ‘the turn-around’ – taking the teeth out of the shark” (video segment in HairStories). The word “nappy” is a pejorative description of tightly curled hair. She goes on to explain that “nappy” is used almost exclusively to describe African American hair. If used on Caucasian people (i.e. President Clinton’s daughter, Chelsea), something is not being said (i.e. President Clinton is from the South and now has his offices in Harlem). Using “nappy” to describe someone’s hair can imply African American ancestry without race being specifically named. Thus, a descriptive word used to portray one race and not another creates a division. Language designates a categorization that does not actually exist in reality. People of many ethnicities, including Caucasians have hair that is tightly curled. To be accurate, all hair textures would have a pejorative word to describe hair in its natural state.
Certainly there are words that describe undesirable hair (frizzy, dull, thin all describe negative states of hair) – none however are tied to race, describing hair in its natural state of any specific ethnicity. Nappy hair thus bears the distinction of describing a negative racial characteristic.

Limiting a word to be used for only one racial group, creates a group that might otherwise have nothing more in common physically, than any other random sampling of people. The Dr. Professor’s “nappy” example acknowledges the way in which distinctions of race and gender are maintained through language. Examining the power of language allows for an honest dialogue about whether language is truthful or valid. The jazz impulse requires such probing and so in the case of HairStories uncovers inequity in language that is baseless and knows no equivalent across races. “Nappology 101” demonstrates the signifying power of the word “nappy.” A few scenes later, the vignette, “Genesis of the Badass” continues to investigate the possibility of reclaiming language. However, this exploration is paired with a strong movement component, as though to physically re-appropriate language.

In “Genesis of the Badass,” Dr. Professor returns to continue the examination of language and how language supports designators of race. But this time, there is more fluidity between the Dr. Professor and the dancers. They lecture too, announcing and defining words describing the state of black hair, while Dr. Professor merges into the group of dancers at times and shows her most expressive movement to this point in the work. The jazz impulse redefinition of self to community is enacted with the changing of roles between narrator and dancers.

Along with the flux in position between Dr. Professor and the other performers, the scene allows for an opportunity to deconstruct and reclaim inflammatory words. The dancers enter the stage wearing sunglasses and are not accompanied by music. The women define terms such as “Negmarron,” “Go Back-Turn Back,” and “the Kitchen,” sharing terms specific to African and African American hair. The women strike tough postures with lots of attitude in how they turn, walk, and interact. They perform strident movement such as marching, suggesting the carving out of territory as though establishing a battle line. When they are finished announcing the terms, the dancers begin to play off each other. They use big movements that cover the space, including extended kicks and floor work. They sometimes appear to be configured like an unruly breakdancing circle or Capoiera roda. The reclamation of what before was bad – nappy, unruly, hair—is a correction of the first scene when the word “nappy” is announced as bad and all the dancers jump away, screeching “EWWW.” “Bad” is now in the domain of cool, a jazzy
place where new possibilities are available. Much like the popular slogan coined in the sixties, “Black is Beautiful,” the audience is watching the power of re-associating a word, once negative to positive.

A shift occurs in this segment which is less an exploration and more a demonstration of how a community might come together and repossess language that had previously been used against them. The tough, even aggressive tone of the segment demonstrates the challenge of reclaiming language and renaming oneself. Urban Bush Women use the concert stage to challenge the language and physicality that has been used to negate African American women in America. As interpreted through the jazz impulse, the principle behind confronting language in HairStories is to facilitate accuracy in thought, speech, and vision, with the purpose of dismantling limiting categorizations of race and gender.

Perhaps the most comprehensive way to repossess language is to re-tell a story. Retelling a story assigns a new perspective and allows fresh possibilities to be considered. It is not making up an entirely new tale, but repurposing the original tale to press boundaries and unpin unoriginal conventions. In HairStories, Zollar writes an open letter to Madam C.J. Walker to express her confusion as to how she should feel about this notable figure. Zollar’s examination of Walker reflects the jazz impulse’s chain in the link of tradition—reassessing the past to uncover meaning relevant to the present.

Zollar, as herself, reads a letter expressing her ambivalence toward Walker, while a woman in a long pale evening dress slowly moves under a soft spotlight. The dancer does not travel, her graceful presence akin to a music box figure. As Zollar reads the section describing her wonderful childhood memories immersed in the “girl culture” of hair, three “children” playing with each other’s hair replace the dancer. Zollar reveals through the letter that though the hot comb burned her physically and psychologically, she would not want to trade the special time with other girls and women as she got her hair done. Then the spotlight shifts to one of the dancer “children” playing with a white, blond-haired doll. Zollar tells of the pain she feels when seeing little girls with processed hair and her wish that more would celebrate their hair’s natural curl. She wonders if young girls will ever see the beauty in nappy hair that Zollar recognizes. The final sentiment of the letter posits a wish for a different future, one in which girls with tightly curled hair will feel no need to straighten their hair to feel beautiful. The examination of Walker evidences the way jazz impulse reexamines the past to contemplate a different future.
In *HairStories*, as interpreted by the jazz impulse, everything is open to examination, including a prominent African American historical figure. Walker is an example of a successful businesswoman who employed many women and was a philanthropist in a time when most African American women had few employment opportunities. Walker used her business to help others. Yet, her hair products were designed to straighten hair, something which perpetuated an idea that straight hair is more attractive than curly hair. Walker participated in supporting the notion that tresses more common to those of European heritage (straight hair) were more desirable than that of those of African heritage (curly hair). Zollar’s letter expressed her feeling that Walker’s products contributed to black self-hatred.

Through the case of Madam C.J. Walker, Zollar’s explores ambiguity in the process of wrestling with the complexity of the past. The uncertainty Zollar feels toward Walker illustrates the challenge of acknowledging the limitations that racist and sexist attitudes have created, while celebrating the success of Walker and acknowledging the shared experience her product created.

In the *HairStories* letter to Walker, this ambiguity allows for the complexity of the situation. The vignette underscores the way that racial and gender categorizations complicate the understanding of history and therefore any assessment of the present. The jazz impulse elicits such challenges to any didactic thought processes. The jazz impulse does not support black and white thinking, but allows for greater breadth to find fresh ways of approaching a problem. The Walker vignette suggests a way to tell the stories of history, one which acknowledges ambiguity and complexity. This is not a literal history, but one made of physicality, memory, and perceptions. Such accounts are often the most powerful versions of history because they recognize the experience behind the “facts.” Certainly, the community of women in *HairStories* are all storytellers of this nature.

The collection and variety of storytellers tell their tales through multiple methods of narrative (ex. autobiography, movement, common experience, and acts of reclamation). Considering Urban Bush Women as storytellers may be a most apt description between the multiple disciplines that the company crosses in their use of dance, theater, and spoken word. As storytellers, they aim to be accessible to their audience; they have something to impart to the listener—a goal. While seeking to engage the audience, the stories told in *HairStories* aim to undo racist and sexist attitudes by challenging language and perspective. The jazz impulse
embodies this re-examination of existing stories to find different conclusions and imagine a different, more equitable future.

The community of storytellers in *HairStories* is led by Dr. Professor who employs the spirit of the jazz impulse, pushing for a re-examination and disruption of convention in language. She, along with the Madam C.J. Walker vignette offers an incisive analysis of how language maintains the categories of race and gender. *HairStories* represents a perspective on race and gender which suggests a hierarchy with Caucasians in the norm and other ethnicities as “other” (subject to treatment that is always measured against the norm). *HairStories* suggest that this racial and sexist hierarchy places Caucasians and men most frequently in positions of power. The piece describes the repercussions of such an imbalance on the minds, bodies, and spirits of those who are frequently in subordinate positions.

To articulate her perspective, Zollar’s methods disrupt conventions in contemporary dance, demonstrating the jazz impulses method of unpinning norms to challenge complacency and stagnation. In *HairStories*, she utilizes the concert dance stage in ways other than testing the limits of the body, challenge dance for dance sake, or dance which is used to tell a fictional narrative. Instead, *HairStories* presents a theoretical analysis through Dr. Professor and then expands on it by using dance to augment the text and creative storytelling. Zollar uses education and art to initiate dialogue, the first step in building community. Thus, concert dance is used to tell political stories which acts as a challenge to more common uses in the modern and post-modern idiom. Employing the jazz impulse, the tactics disrupt theatrical conventions of storytelling, content, and the use of dance. However, the purpose of the disruption is transparent and through the context of race and gender, a hair history is created and presented. Therefore, the decision of Zollar and company to create *HairStories* is aimed at challenging language and get at the heart of the ways we communicate.
CHAPTER FOUR

The Communal Vibe of the Gospel Impulse

During the ending scene of *HairStories*, the stage is transformed by house dance. As the Dr. Professor concludes her statement on freedom hair, her final words are “Let’s celebrate personal style. Let’s celebrate. Let’s celebrate free expression. Let’s celebrate. Let’s celebrate…” (Dr. Professor). Her last phrase is drowned out by the opening strains of George Clinton’s “One Nation Under a Groove.” In these defining moments, a gospel impulse is evident in the Dr. Professor’s encouragement, the accompanying music’s call, and the seven dancers of Urban Bush Women who connect with one another and invite the audience into a communal vibe.

The message of *HairStories* is that connection to community, analyzed through a gospel impulse, has the ability to heal feelings of alienation and to offer support in overcoming the challenging barriers to freedom. Placing the gospel-infused vignette, which celebrates hair freedom, as the finale suggests that in *HairStories*, the gospel impulse is the culmination of the blues and jazz impulses. This last scene, the explosive house dance-inspired finale, embodies the gospel impulse’s encouragement to come together to overcome obstacles. Together, through the power of community, prejudice can be undone and salvation reached.

Fittingly for *HairStories*, at the heart of gospel (Werner’s final impulse) is the importance of a connection to community. Offering a more in-depth explanation, Werner writes,

> At its best, the gospel impulse helps people experience themselves *in relation to* rather than *on their own*. Gospel makes the feeling of human separateness, which is what the blues are all about, bearable… The gospel impulse consists of a three-step process: (1) acknowledging the burden; (2) bearing witness; (3) finding redemption…Whatever its specific incarnation, gospel redemption breaks down the difference between personal salvation and communal liberation. No one makes it alone (Werner 28-31).

As Werner suggests, the gospel impulse takes the survival mechanism of the blues one step further. Gospel prioritizes a connection to others that makes an outcome other than just getting by seem possible. The gospel seeks to understand *how* to overcome the struggle. It cultivates the energy of community and works to pull people together. Through dance and the call-and-response technique, both of which are utilized throughout the *HairStories*, a community is activated and energized. Membership in this group represents transcendence over any alienation
toward self or community. Hence, *HairStories* illustrates that finding personal connections, and ultimately redemption, through community transcends adversity and enacts Werner’s view of a gospel impulse.

For *HairStories*, the gospel impulse specifically focuses on finding redemption through a communal vibe, which figures prominently into Werner’s assessment of how the gospel impulse functions in life. He says, “Gospel testifies that to seek redemption is to embrace connection, to see the dividing lines for the illusions they are. You bear witness to the troubles you’ve seen and to how you got over. Then you do your damnedest to live the life you sing about in your song” (Werner 249). Werner makes clear that gospel redemption cannot be achieved alone. Finding redemption necessitates the same skills that undoing racism and sexism requires – an ability to connect to others and recognize the illusion of divisive systems of thought. Moreover, gospel requires integrity, that your actions match your convictions. Such clarity requires self-knowledge, insight and honesty. Essentially, gospel redemption, as defined by Werner, requires individuals to connect to community, share their burdens and together create the world they would like to live in.

The underlying principle of the gospel impulse is the focus on personal connection, whether between people or between people and a higher purpose. The gospel impulse recalls the tie between the divine and earthly plane – a connection enslaved Africans carried to America. Thus, the gospel impulse is firmly rooted in African American tradition, a belief system that bridges both the material and spiritual worlds, especially through a connection to the ancestors. The gospel impulse recognizes the mutual dependency between individuals and their community, championing a communal, not personal, solution to survive and transcend (Werner 28). Both the connection of individuals to community and the earthly/divine relationship play out in the dance realm through a specific mechanism of call-and-response.

The true elegance of *HairStories* lies in Urban Bush Women’s skilled use of call-and-response to initiate dialogue. On the most general level, the call reaches every man, woman, and child who has a hair story. For example, one of the hair party exercises asked people to pull out their driver’s license and talk to their neighbor about what was going on with their hair that day. This way of engaging participants at hair parties was also used to engage the audience in abridged versions of *HairStories*. The exercise demonstrates an understanding of an individual’s need to experience call-and-response to challenge passive viewership while also
demonstrating how easy it is to begin a dialogue. The message is clear – we are all in on the conversation; we have more in common than separates us.

Specifically describing the history and manner of call-and-response, Werner writes,

The core of gospel politics lies in the “call and response” principle of African-American culture. The basic structure of call and response is straightforward. An individual voice, frequently a preacher or singer, calls out in a way that asks for a response. The response can be verbal, musical, physical – anything that communicates with the leader or the rest of the group. The response can affirm, argue, redirect the dialogue, raise a new question (Werner 11).

Call-and-response engages and gathers community, while offering a forum to express the burdens of life and be validated. Werner continues saying, “At its core, call-and-response is the African American form of critical analysis, a process that draws on the experience and insights of the entire community. The individual maintains a crucial role; a carefully crafted call can lead to the best, most useful insights. But the individual does not necessarily, or ideally, maintain control” (Werner 14). As Werner suggests, in call-and-response, the relationship between caller and respondents frequently changes and the power dynamic is fluid. Individuals maintain awareness of themselves in relation to the group. The form provides immediate feedback as together individuals shape the group’s values. Werner’s analysis demonstrates how call-and-response works to make community inclusive of all voices, and inspires valuable discourse.

Werner’s description of call-and-response as a method of communal feedback links the technique to a similar use in African societies. In describing the function of call-and-response Robert Farris Thompson writes, “The rights and feelings of others loom large in African creativity…His creativity may be void if the chorus finds him beneath contempt in a social sense. The chorus…is therefore, a direct expression of public sanction and opinion. Call-and-response goes to the very heart of the notion of good government, of popular response to the actions of the ideal leader” (Thompson 27). Thompson suggests that call-and-response is active democracy giving voice to a vital public. In terms of the gospel impulse, call-and-response redeems individuals from feelings of alienation, but pulling them into a group and providing a forum for their voice to be heard.

Demonstrating the engaging potential of call-and-response, two short scenes, “The Church of What’s Happening Now With Yo’ Head” and “Jeannie Jones Johnson,” are examples of how Urban Bush Women use the technique in HairStories to construct community as a means
to generate dialogue. The value of call-and-response in *HairStories* is to allow the audience to experience the vitality of the exchange between leader and the chorus. The instant feedback of call-and-response energizes both the individual and the group. Through humor and an infectious vibe that is irresistible, the audience is invited to witness the passion and momentum that a collective commitment can generate. The gospel impulse uses call-and-response to remind individuals that they are mutually reliant on one another and only together can shape a more equitable future. The technique enlivens *HairStories*, with the potential to engage viewers to become part of the dialogue on racist and sexist attitudes, rather than passive viewers.

“The Church of What’s Happening Now With Yo’ Head” vignette fosters the energy of a gospel service and stages a call-and-response between Zollar acting as a preacher and the dancers providing the chorus. The segment shares some ideas about hair culture (such as it is unlucky to have people touch your head or have more than one person doing your hair at a time) that have been passed through the generations. The scene is informative for those who may be new to the energy of a church revival or who know little about the culture of African American hair. Conversely, the vignette works to connect to those who have been raised with these elements of African American hair culture. Viewers are validated by seeing a familiar cultural context represented. Through the skilled use of call-and-response, Zollar and Urban Bush Women both educate and validate their audience.

Zollar, acting in the role of a preacher, is accompanied on stage by the dancers who are acting as congregants in a church processional. The dancers are animated and boisterous as they testify to Zollar words. One dancer raises a hand over her head, while another points a finger to the heavens as she bows her head. A different dancer has a stooped walk as though she might fall to her knees in prayer. Though the dancers are close together and the movements seem unruly, they are keenly aware of one another and do not bump into or infringe on one another’s space. Zollar and dancers are in constant communication, attuning to one another verbally and physically. Through the interaction between her and the dancers, the scene demonstrates call-and-response as it might happen in an African American church. The continuous feedback, representative of each individual’s presence, attention, and focus creates an energetic connection—the vibe—between leader and chorus.

Commenting on the role that energy and spirit play into sanctified church service, Werner writes, “Often the poorest churches in poor communities, sanctified churches valued religious
ecstasy more highly than polished phrasing or perfect pitch. At times, a sanctified church could erupt with a collective energy that transformed centuries of bitter hardship into moments of pure connection – with self, community, and the soul-deep presence of the Lord” (Werner 5). The gospel impulse privileges an environment that aligns people— with themselves, with others, and with spirit, however that be defined. The heightened energy and the sense of community that is created through the collective experience cultivate an atmosphere that offers a place to begin working together. In HairStories, the vibe is formed as a means to inspire and invite individuals to be a part of dismantling sexist and racist ideologies.

Continuing in the scene, Zollar reminds everyone that they have a hair story and encourages her congregation to unburden themselves if they have something heavy weighing on their heart. Amidst the heightened energy that has been created, a woman with no hair separates from the group. Now, Zollar stands with the chorus, indicating that the leader has changed as a new person prepares to speak. The dancers’ heads are bowed forward, hands are folded in prayer at their chests, while their shoulders shake up and down rapidly. The exaggerated movements of their entrance have been replaced by the constant motion of the shoulders. The shaking of the upper torso suggests a physical engagement with what the speaker is saying, along with the vocal support of her oration.

The dancer who has separated herself from the chorus begins by talking about how cutting off hair connected her to the higher order of the universe. She adds that she finds baldness to be liberating and that one’s head is a temple for the divine. She adds that the shape that DNA and locked hair share —the spiral—prove that Africans are the original people. This will always tie African Americans to Africa. She says, “No matter how far you take us from our source, we will always return.” The final line offers a poignant call to those who have experienced (and are still enduring) the legacy of enslavement.

The scene celebrates African heritage while remembering the strength of those who endured slavery. In gospel style, the segment acknowledges and bears witness to the history of enslavement in America. The message is that our hair ties us to our roots, to where we come from. Remembering those who have come before is a key element of the gospel impulse. Being grounded in the past provides perspective. This is conducive to stability and objectivity, both of which are invaluable to communication and building community.
However, the impetus of the scene is a community connection. “The Church of What’s Happening Now With Yo’ Head,” uses a church revival style to demonstrate how vital communication is to individual growth. The call-and-response of the gospel impulse allows people to become conscious of their interconnectedness to others. This awareness shapes an outlook that considers the best interest of all. This is the work of *HairStories* – to demonstrate the power of the individual story, but not at the expense of losing sight of the whole.

Another example using the elements of call-and-response in *HairStories* is the segment “Jeannie Jones Johnson.” Zollar plays the title character, a motivational self-help guru who repeats positive affirmations for the audience. “Messages come through our hair,” she says. She asks the audience to repeat phrases such as “every day is a good hair day,” and “when our hair shines our inner light shines and when our inner light shines our hair shines.” While the audience is not shaping the discourse as in typical of call-and-response, they are participating, which is the first element of engaging a group.

Next, Jeannie Jones Johnson uses the topic of the audience’s hair to create banter. One women’s hair is quiet, so she needs to contemplate and light a candle. Another woman’s hair is wild, so she is a wild child. Still another woman is encouraged to have more sex because her hair is dry. Zollar finishes the spot by saying, “every day, every way, I know my hair will be OK.” The satirical segment pokes fun at pop culture through a mock talk show. However, this short interlude also contains fundamentals of call-and-response. In “Jeannie Jones Johnson,” this strategy is employed by Urban Bush Women to engage the audience and subvert any objectifying gaze which might prevent people from connecting to the work personally. Capitalizing on the anodyne nature of such an entertaining vignette, Zollar cultivates the opportunity to keep people consciously a part of what is happening on stage, engaging them in a space that feels non-threatening. Continuously inviting the viewer into the piece suggests that the individual is accountable to what is being said on stage. They are also experiencing an awareness of others in the audience as they listen to their responses. Developing the viewer’s sense of interconnectedness through call-and-response possibly makes those who witness the piece more available to the deeper message. In her book *Butting Out: Reading Resistive Choreographies Through Works by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Chandralekha*, dance scholar Ananya Chatterjea writes,
…to intervene in the typical audience-performer relationship and foster a kind of visibility-resistant-to-objectification, Zollar often brings the typical black call-and-response modality into mainstream performance spaces to encourage a sense of engaged spectatorship, diminishing the distance between audience and performer. She also sometimes speaks directly to audiences, asking them to reply to her questions, exhorting them to be active participants in creating a performance event (Chatterjea 23).

Just as Chatterjea suggests, the character of Jeannie Jones Johnson allows the audience to be pulled into a performance event. The short vignette affects the entire piece, infusing HairStories with a sense that the audience is part of the piece, not passive viewers. Most importantly, all of the vocal call-and-response exercises prepare the audience for the rousing gospel-inspired closing dance sequence about freedom hair.

However, the Dr. Professor returns to the stage for a final speech before the full cast’s final dance sequence. She is now dressed in a red t-shirt, green cargo pants, and her hair is down, making it unclear if she is still playing the Dr. Professor. She begins the vignette with her back to the audience, in contrast to the Dr. Professor’s direct engagement with the audience. Her African-inspired dancing, notably with knees bent, rotation of the hips, and free rotation of the arms, is accompanied by drums. She is grounded and rhythmic, even sensual. Though, in between sequences of her dance, she repositions herself to face and address the audience, continuing in her role as an educator. She is once more the Dr. Professor, yet, she has changed. She is now often in a diagonal stance, rather than the straight forward posture of her previous vignettes. It is as though she has rubbed off the Dr. Professor edge. The flux between her role as a dancer and as an educator demonstrates the multiple capabilities within each of us. Channeling the gospel impulse’s “belief that life’s burdens can be transformed into hope, salvation, the promise of redemption,” there is message of optimism imbedded in this character shift (Werner 28).

Perhaps HairStories is suggesting that though identifies like race and gender shape our experience and inform our perspective, they do not limit our ability to make connections with others. Regardless of what barriers may separate individuals, the many capacities that exist within each of us offering points of commonality that can provide a place to begin a dialogue and eventually work together for positive change. To this end, the most useful dialogue occurs when people have found their voice and can articulate their perspective. The Dr. Professor does this in
her final lesson by defining “Afrocentricity” as a means to understand the perspective of
HairStories. She says “Afrocentricity” is:

…placing African values at the center of any analysis that involves African culture and behaviors. If we really looked to Africa, we see the embracing of artifice as a major construct of how African approach decoration and adornment… And what we have is the aesthetics of style. Style is the predominant concern. So what we have is freedom hair. In the twenty-first century we see African American hair styles going beyond mere imitation of white styles. This embrace of artifice is an illustration of Afrocentricity in hair styling… So let us celebrate. Let us celebrate self-determination in personal style. Let us celebrate naming ourselves… (Dr. Professor).

With this closing statement, Dr. Professor summarizes what hair can be read to represent in the twenty-first century. She connects hair choices to personal freedom, making it impossible to dismiss artifice and style as shallow concerns. For the women who very literally bear the battle scars of the hair wars in their home, their society, and their minds, the naming of what has been won, “freedom hair,” is an incredible victory over the cultural practices that have been examined throughout the piece, specifically those that have a history of devaluing African American women. Furthermore, it is a reclamation of African heritage, a legacy of which was stripped from those of African heritage during enslavement. In light of the tremendous history that has been explored in HairStories, the Dr. Professor’s speech expresses “defiant hope” for lasting change, transforming a painful history into a celebration of freedom, self-determination, and personal style.

Redemption from the transgressions of the past and a hope for sustained change are expressed through the Dr. Professor’s words and in the dance of the final vignette. Redemption occurs as the division of mind, body, and spirit are transcended, and with it, illusions that separate people from one another. It is the sense of rescue that replaces feelings of alienation or struggle. HairStories provides salvation for those who have battled their hair—loving themselves even if no one else will. Finding connection to self, community, and spirit are all redemptive possibilities that HairStories has explored and are all embodied in house dance and so, HairStories concludes with an uninterrupted dance sequence, which mimics the energy and inclusiveness of house dance.

After her speech, the “call” shifts from the Dr. Professor to the music and she “responds” by moving. She is joined by the dancers who are costumed in house club gear (loose cargo pants
and tops that bear the Urban Bush Women logo). The shirts have been altered, so that while all started as the same shirt, now each is as different as the dancer who wears it. Each dancer’s hair has also been changed from earlier in the piece. One dancer dons a shiny, silver wig, while another has braids. The group moves into a semi-circle, the only accommodation to the stage, otherwise, the setting takes on every characteristic of a house club. Certainly the house club is staged – the choreography moves between being presentational (dancers moving in sync) to what appears to be improvisational (dancers attuned to one another and, in fact, feeding off of each other). Ultimately, it is a performance complete with synchronized steps and careful timing. However, the effect is to allow the audience to be swept along the tidal wave of energy; to experience why collective energy is such a desirable state to work. The vibe generated from such exhilarating dancing is the magnetic sense of “being in the zone.”

A call is sent through the music asking everyone to come together, as viewer or dancer, as one group united by the dance. Urban Bush Women respond to this call through dance that is concerned with the same unification and liberation. Urban Bush Women dancers demonstrate virtuosic, but accessible steps through moments of conformity and traditional presentation (dancers face and make eye contact with the audience). This grouping, however, breaks apart to have dancers moving for themselves, generating their own physical interpretation of the music. They may connect with one another, making short duets, but these quickly dissolve back to individual pursuits, much like would happen at a house club as the focus is on the individual’s relationship to the whole, rather than a prioritization on coupling. The flow, or the degree of control that each dancer has is very free. Though leaps and jumps, the dance is quite athletic. Some dancers even vogue, resulting in confident posturing and the feeling of a fashion show presentation. Such moments are mixed with powerful moments of stillness, allowing the audience to absorb what occurs on stage. Through a cultivating of energy, the audience accesses the feeling of freedom that is championed in this final segment’s oration and music.

A remixed version of George Clinton’s “One Nation Under a Groove,” which features the refrain “…ready or not here we come,” is the fitting melody for the final sequence. The Funkadelic song says that freedom can be found through dancing, so hair and dancing become paths to shattering limits, to finding self, finding likeminded individuals, or finding divinity. Choosing a song by Clinton provides an interesting layer to a final segment. The progenitor of the bands Parliament and Funkadelic, Clinton is an artist who creates music grounded in the
black aesthetic even as it invites everyone. Urban Bush Women also perform work deeply embedded in African American traditions, with a fundamental concern for the liberation of all. It is as though Clinton through music and Zollar through dance are unpacking prejudice to the core through their art. They have rooted themselves within an African American artistic sensibility and from this solid place they work to flexibly include others.

In writing about the values underscoring house music, Werner quotes Brian Chin who says, “House music surely speaks for itself. Its ideals – peace among all people; sharing thought and emotions without self-consciousness; unconditional belonging – emerge inevitable as subtexts, whether it’s in your favorite selection of house songs, or in a solitary, uncomplicated line of reassurance: ‘We don’t really need a crowd to have a party’” (Werner 282). House music, and by extension house dance, is meant to be entirely inclusive. House shares the gospel value of coming together to make our individual troubles bearable. The freedom and acceptance of the form showcases the values of the participants. The underlying philosophy for participants of house dance is that movement cannot be wrong. Rather, the form offers an expressive outlet to physicalize one’s voice and creates opportunities to unite with others. House encourages individuals to find their voice, to be respectful of other’s contributions and to engage with others without losing their sense of self. Through these skills, house participants use their bodies to demonstrate what is necessary to create community.

House dance typically takes place in clubs, features a DJ and draws on improvisational technique. Dancers mix recognizable images, such as those from ads or movies, with more personalized expressions. Humor, especially that of parody, is integral to the form. The humor that emerges reflects “the redemption of the vital aliveness of playfulness and fun” which is critical to a successful vibe (Sommer 74).

According to dance scholar Sally Sommer, nothing is more fundamental to house dance than “the vibe.” She writes, “The vibe is an active communal force, a feeling, a rhythm that is created by the mix of dancers, the balance of loud music, the effects of darkness and light, the energy. Everything interlocks to produce a powerful sense of liberation” (Sommer 73). For house dancers, fully participating in the vibe involves a loss of self-consciousness, allowing music and movement to unify participants. The value of merging with the vibe is that the self-critic, which impedes connection, is silenced. The individual becomes more willing to express themselves and honor others who do the same. Any sense of human separateness is replaced by
the experience of interconnectedness. Through the vibe, space is made to articulate and share one’s voice, and to connect with others.

Hence, the values of house are akin to the path to gospel redemption. House is based in community – a community that uses music and movement to dissolve divisions that keep people from connecting. Connection allows individuals to overcome the limitations of their individual circumstances and work toward a common purpose. In HairStories, the ultimate goal is a more free society. To get there, the piece demonstrates the cost of prejudice, provides a vocabulary to initiate dialogue, and finally invites the audience into the vibe to begin working together. Sharing in the vibe of the finale offers a vision of what answering the call to join community can feel like.

By the final vignette, the viewers have seen that freedom (in this instance, the freedom of self-expression) has been hard won, and is the legacy of a much deeper fight. The audience has traveled through the painful history of prejudicial treatment based on hair and while the case has been made that the American ideals of physical beauty are racially biased, in the end, women are triumphant, not sad, over this reality. HairStories has revealed the reality of a specific perspective and has provided a catharsis for those who have told their story. Perhaps most importantly, HairStories has provided a forum for the gathering of community—the primary concern of the gospel impulse in the piece.

HairStories works hard to gather this community so a dialogue on race and gender will begin. This discourse hopes to allows those of different affinity groups deal with a shared history. For some viewers, the piece will validate their experience. For others, it provides an education, instituting a level of awareness for a more complex history of America. Hopefully for all, HairStories will serve as a reminder of the commonality amongst the human family. Along with the vibe and the technique of call-and-response, house club mores provide an example of how to begin a dialogue with others. This is created through self-expression, points of connection, and mutual respect. The subsequent freedom of expression that is possible allows for validation, transcendence, and redemption. The gospel impulse serves as a reminder that the quest for freedom can only be attained through the coming together of community.
CONCLUSION

Together We Shall Overcome

Dr. Cornel West—Zollar’s inspiration for Dr. Professor—is a distinguished professor of African American Studies and Religion at Princeton University. On January 13, 2011, Dr. West took part in a Symposium entitled America’s Next Chapter. One of the questions he was asked was: What does a blues people have to teach a blues nation? He began his answer by first defining the blues (in the words of Ralph Ellison) as a lyrical telling of one’s own catastrophe. West explained:

It’s dealing with the catastrophic. Black people have been dealing with the catastrophe of slavery, social death. The catastrophe of Jim and Jane Crow, American terrorism. That was civic death. We were part of the body politic but not having rights to access the public good. We’ve been dealing with the psychic catastrophe of being taught to hate ourselves. Less beautiful, less intelligent, less moral. The white supremacist lie told about us… But look what we produced. In the face of slavery, Frederick Douglass, do we want to enslave white brothers and sisters? No, we want freedom for everybody. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, do we want to Jim Crow white brothers and sisters? No. We want rights and liberties for everybody (West).

West illustrates how African Americans have championed democracy for all in every fight for freedom. They have survived catastrophe by finding a voice to share the brutal experience. Concerning equality, African Americans have challenged the hypocrisy of unequal rights in a country founded on freedom. Moreover, African Americans have a history of seeking justice through collective action, recognizing that democracy requires participation by all to work. Through legal, political, and cultural action, African Americans’ quest for freedom has forced America to honor the precepts on which the country was founded.

HairStories continues the African American tradition of seeking liberation for everyone through compassion, education, and communal action. The piece suggests that the keys to transcending limitations are to find a voice to tell your story, acknowledge and learn to act in the world around you, and then create the vibe to gather community through a collective spirit. Ultimately, HairStories is a guide to freedom. Providing a language through which to describe the journey toward liberation, the blues, jazz, and gospel impulses are used to analyze HairStories. The blues provide an outlet to share catastrophe, jazz works to unpin convention
and gospel facilitates the rallying of community for a redemptive solution. Together the three impulses illuminate the tactics and goals of *HairStories*.

The blues provides an outlet for individuals to express their experience. Sometimes funny, often bittersweet, the blues story allows individuals to find their voice, leading to catharsis. The individual can shape and potentially process the experience, though doing so does not fix or transcend the problem. What the blues impulse does so powerfully in *HairStories* is name the problem. In the “Blues Suite,” little girls jerk, twitch, and attempt to wrest away from the hurt of hair being pulled and pressed. Hair done by hot combs and chemical treatments (connoting that natural hair is not appealing) is both physically and mentally harmful. The implication that African American hair needs to be altered to be attractive reflects racial and gender discrimination. In *HairStories*, the young girls’ vignettes articulate children’s powerless against such prejudice and substantiate why such attitudes should be challenged. As such, the work uses autobiography to depict the effects of African American females having their hair painfully altered. The personal recollections play a crucial role as the core of the blues sentiment.

Shedding light on the particular importance that autobiography serves for African Americans, dance scholar Veta Goler writes that “The pathway of autobiography to self-determination is primarily through correcting erroneous information and the omission of information, as well as reducing ignorance and hopelessness through personal testimony…Through autobiography African Americans protest oppression and record their resistance” (Goler 29-30). Goler suggests that autobiography is a way for African American women to add to or rectify existing history, gather strength through the telling of their story, and challenge and resist impingements on their freedom. Through (often humorous) dance scenes, *HairStories* uses autobiography to tell the stories of childhood, validating these experiences. Personal testaments augment the under-told histories of African American women, of girls being made to feel imperfect because of their hair. The girls’ stories shed light on how social customs through hair marginalize African American women and why these attitudes need to be eradicated. As Urban Bush Women perform the blues, expressing the personal pain of life experience, what is performed is also connected to a larger political truth, that of a society that imposes racist and sexist limitations. So, the use of autobiography to “finger the jagged grain of
your brutal experience” and expressing it through movement, text, and song is a powerful performance of identification.

Paring autobiography within the theoretical framework presented by the narrator, Dr. Professor, *HairStories* draws on a jazz impulse and suggests that racism and sexism are the systems of oppression behind the blues-saturated, personal recollections. Through jazz idioms, the Dr. Professor articulates a premise highlighting how race is constructed through language. Defining words and in some cases reclaiming them (such as the word “nappy”) deconstructs language to uncover the possibility of more honesty in the ways that we communicate with one another. *HairStories* equips audiences with a shared vocabulary that could potentially begin a cross-cultural dialogue.

Dr. Professor, who both educates and challenges the audience, works through the jazz impulse, which advocates interrupting complacency and challenging conventions in language and movement. Along with examining language, she also tests the parameters of concert dance by using it as an educational forum to further critical dialogue about race and gender. She underscores her verbal message with her movement. At times, Dr. Professor uses sultry hand gestures beckoning the audience to stay with her on the journey. At other times, she posits a firm, grounded stance and pointed gestures of the arms and fingers, less inviting than insistent. The changing manner of presentation offers various avenues to deliver information and connect to the audience. Moreover, Dr. Professor moves between narrator and dancer. She merges into the group, taking her place as a dancer, only to re-emerge ready to lead the piece. She embodies multiple capacities through her movement and through skillfully weaving them together suggest a skill necessary for successful dialogue. Her multiplicity in identity and gesture reflects the jazz impulses constant process of redefinition by presenting multiple capacities within one character.

Part of redefinition engendered by jazz impulse reexamines the connection of self to community. In the gospel impulse, a connection to others manifests through energy known as the vibe. The use of the gospel impulse in *HairStories* allows viewers to feel a connection to the communal. The vibe is created from the shared energy of the participants. This creates an environment in which divisions can be overlooked, though individuals do not lose themselves upon entering the vibe. Rather, they develop their voice and make space for their fellow participants to do the same. Together the participants in the vibe look for multiple points of connection and create new and original ways of working. The gospel impulse is looking for all
manner of ways to connect, reflecting how much we need one another to overcome limitations in thought and action. Ultimately, in *HairStories*, the vibe encourages participants to engage in the dialogue on race and gender and work for a more equitable future.

The gospel impulse is perfectly illustrated through house dance. A seasoned house dancer is aware of his/her own need for physical space and communion with the vibe. This awareness brings the dancer to interact with the music and other dancers through call-and-response. The dancer expresses him/herself in relation to their fellow dancers and the DJ. Finding a movement voice to express themselves in concert with (sometimes direct interaction, sometimes respectful of space) creates the vibe. The gospel impulse suggests that energy of many singular voices coming together for a common purpose, which in house is a sense of belonging, while maintaining one’s own voice, allows transcendence over feelings of alienation and powerlessness that accompanies limits on freedom.

Through *HairStories*, Zollar and Urban Bush Women give the viewers a three-step process to overcome oppression and seek liberation. First, through finding one’s voice the problem is named. Through the blues impulse the catastrophic experience is expressed so a catharsis may occur. The second step is to understand the obstacles and gather the tool needed to overcome them. This dynamic process finds multiple methods of analyzing and engaging the problem. The jazz impulse demands a state of attention to question and challenge anything that might impede progress. Moreover, the jazz impulse encourages knowledge of self, others, and the past to be able to skillfully add and respond to the dialogue. The final step in the process toward freedom is to create the vibe; the most effective conditions to mobilize a congregation of like-minded individuals. House dance is the perfect model in which to experience the gospel impulse’s value of self-knowledge, respect for other, and creation of a beneficial state of togetherness. Taken together, the process is transformative and healing.

Through *HairStories*, Zollar and Urban Bush Women create an arc of gradual empowerment. The journey to freedom is constructed through growing self-awareness from childhood, to professional, and finally as a transcendent community member. Liberation for all begins with the individual recognizing their voice, understanding themselves in relationship to community and the past, and then being able to join with others to work for equality. Cornel West suggests that the legacy of the black freedom movements is that democracy is only attained through the same rights for everyone. Exhibiting this legacy through *HairStories*, Zollar and
Urban Bush Women have used the specific instance of African American women’s hair to validate individual experience, create a dialogue about race and gender, and remind all viewers of the necessity of working together to create a more equitable society.
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Video Recordings

Rachel Howell earned her Bachelor’s degree in English, African American Studies, and Women’s Studies in 1998 at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. In 2002, she earned a second Bachelor of Arts in Dance from the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee. While living in Milwaukee, Rachel began studying Iyengar and Ashtanga yoga, and took coursework in dance therapy. In 2002, Rachel spent two months in Bali, Indonesia to become certified to teach yoga through Yoga Arts. Rachel followed her love of dance to Tallahassee, FL to earn a degree in American Dance Studies from Florida State University. As part of the program, she was able to intern in the office of Urban Bush Women as well as teach yoga at their summer institutes in Brooklyn and New Orleans. Upon completing her degree, Rachel plans to continue her research in dance and healing.