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Black Women of The Cakewalk: Reclaiming The Performance Through Corporeal Orature

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Abstract

The presentation of the Cakewalk through history is contested through white narratives of appropriation followed by Black narratives of reclamation. Originating in the United States as a performance created by slaves, the Cakewalk is a predecessor to many forms of social dance today. However, it is often Black men who receive recognition for the performance while Black women are forgotten to history. In looking at a historical review of the Cakewalk and following two case studies of Aida Overton Walker and Heather Agyepong, this article argues for the importance of Black women in reclaiming the Cakewalk by embedding new narratives into its history through their own bodily presence and agency. The work extends from theories of literature, politics, and media to physical embodiment, understanding that the Black body has agency in the ways it chooses to communicate through visual presence and performance. In doing this work, Aida Overton Walker and Heather Agyepong not only redefine the presence of the Black person through history, but also negotiate how Black identity should and can be presented.

Keywords

Cakewalk, Heather Agyepong, Corporeal Orature, Black Dance, Aida (Ada) Overton Walker

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Introduction

Black performance narratives have historically been dictated, rewritten, or reinscribed by white authors and audiences. Because of this, records of Blackness are often depicted within what Heather Agyepong (2021) labels as "trauma cycles", where depictions of Black history surround topics such as slavery and violence, rather than displaying the successes of Black society. However, artists such as Agyepong have recently worked on reinstating historical Black art and performance in ways that are empowering. This research dives into the negotiations and reclamations that two Black female artists engaged in, Heather Agyepong and Aida Overton Walker, that do the work of reclaiming the Cakewalk and its representations as a Black form of performance through a means of corporeal orature, the ability to engage in communication through the body. The artists not only carry on the intangible cultural heritage and history of the Cakewalk through different mediums, but they also recenter the dance's history away from white colonial interpretations and appropriations and towards a Black history and understanding. Their work acts as a mode of reclamation of the Cakewalk, taking ownership of a historically Black performance that cannot be copyrighted as a social dance and instead claiming it through embedding new narratives and meanings.

This article examines the Cakewalk from multiple points in history: the mid-1800s in transition from a pre-slavery to post-slavery America; the early 1900s during Overton Walker's rise to fame with the performance of the Cakewalk; the early-to-mid 1900s, when 'negrophilia' started to rise in the US and Europe; and finally in 2021 with Agyepong's research and work. This article by no means is a comprehensive history of the Cakewalk and the people who participated in its proliferation to today, but instead highlights the importance of two Black women in preserving the history of the Cakewalk. Acknowledging my position as a white author, I rely on their personal experiences as well as histories, archival objects, and theoretical analysis to explore how their work engages with historical records through corporeal orature, performative gestures that may engage like speech (DeFrantz 2004).

Agyepong's *Wish You Were Here* (2020) revisits the history of the Cakewalk as Black social dance and movement performance. As an artist working across multiple mediums including photography and film, she was commissioned by The Hyman Collection in 2019 to create a response to postcard imagery of the Cakewalk. Agyepong (2021) explains how the exhibition acts as a therapeutic exploration of Black representation through history as she counteracts narratives of Black history as depicted through trauma cycles. She explores self-care and therapy through the creation of an archive, in part by reclaiming Black autonomy by embodying the 'Queen of the Cakewalk' Aida Overton Walker. As someone of Ghanaian heritage, Agyepong's education in white western society depicted Black individuals as a people who were enslaved, victims, or

constantly in need of saving; and she felt surrounded by art that depicted Black people in the same way. Her artistic presentation of narratives of Black people show them thriving, shifting from the perspective that an obsession with 'negrophilia' recreated to once again inspire agency and power to shape their own histories (Agyepong 2021). In doing so, Agyepong's work functions to decolonize the archive, not only uncovering hidden Black histories, but also inscribing new meaning to the imagery. In addition to responding to negative imagery, her work is also intended as a dialogue with Overton Walker, two Black women talking through time in their embodied depictions. By tracing the history of the Cakewalk as first a social dance that was a mockery of white society, which was then appropriated by whites, and continually renegotiated over time between races throughout history, there is a shift in the autonomy of Black narratives eventually embodied through Agyepong herself. In doing this, Agyepong is working through what Hal Foster identifies as "an archival impulse", seeking "to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present" through not only her analysis of the archive, but also by building upon it through her own work (2004: 4).

There are many women who should be recognized in the history of the Cakewalk through the 1900s, however, this article focuses specifically on Aida Overton Walker for three reasons. First, Overton Walker is reflected in the work of Agyepong, providing a direct link from the historical past to the modern day. Secondly, the recognition of Overton Walker's importance in performing the Cakewalk is centered around the politics and histories of acknowledgement for Black Americans. Finally, she often receives little notice when the focus is on famous Black male performers such as her husband, George Walker, and their performance partner, Bert Williams. In historical accounts of the Cakewalk, Walker and Williams, along with numerous other male performers, receive the majority of academic attention, while Overton Walker is relegated to footnotes or a few sentences in texts that do not specifically focus on her (see Emery 1988; Gottschild 2000; Hughes and Meltzer 1990; Knowles 2002; Woll 1989). Therefore, this research highlights Overton Walker's contributions to the Cakewalk and recognizes the impacts she had on the artform.

Based on the work of Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988: xxii) this investigation holds to the idea that dance and performance, and their associated ephemera, may relate to other Black works, whether it be writing, imagery, music, or performance, to continue to build on texts and tropes to create art that continues to resemble itself. Overton Walker and Agyepong engage in the revision of white narratives of Black performance histories in their respective works. Through the repeated performative presence of Black women engaging with the Cakewalk during different periods of time, they continue to lay claim to and rewrite the narrative of the performance of it as one that is specifically of Black culture that resists colonial interpretations.

Overview of Concepts

> Dance steps are not words without grammar, without structure. They point to a bigger conversation, with a place, with people embedded in that place. Listen to how they're talking and why. (Naomi Macalalad Bragin, 2023: 355).

In dance, meaning may be embodied through performance which may express a variety of ideas to be interpreted by the viewer. Latching onto the idea of embodied performance, this research analyzes embodiment through different performative standpoints identified in the history and choreography of the Cakewalk and its related imagery. This expands the research beyond the dance itself and includes culturally specific connotations that ephemera may hold. In exploring how these connotations are understood, I drew from Black cultural theorists and interpreted their communication through Thomas DeFrantz's concept of corporeal orature. Corporeal orature discusses how the expressive movements of dance may "cite contexts beyond the dance" (DeFrantz, 2004: 67). DeFrantz's theoretical analysis seems to be grounded in the live performance aspect of dance. However, the still body is still a body and therefore able to embody meaning. Because the still body can still perform, this article extends corporeal orature to still media.

To understand how corporeal orature may engage culturally specific meanings, I integrate social psychology research into cultural embodiment to bring forth the concept of hard embodiment*,* which looks at how people may express meanings, ideals, and values through movements that could be derived from cultural contexts (Cohen and Leung, 2009, p.1286). Within the study of hard embodiment, the idea of totem embodiments relates that actions may "…operate at a purely symbolic level, having no inherent meaning except that which is commonly recognized within a culture" (Cohen and Leung, 2009: 1285). Totem embodiments explain how we can associate gestures, ways of moving, and physical stature to certain ideas. Though hard embodiment discusses how gestures develop a meaning through cultural practice and repetition, it does not discuss the active communication of these meanings within performance contexts, but instead focuses on how culture is embedded subconsciously into our everyday bodily gestures and actions. This lack of focus on communication within hard embodiment may be because embodied cultural identity "is both perceived, shaped and mostly expressed without conscious awareness" (Galdos & Warren, 2021: 83). Social representations theory (SRT) may expand the concept of hard embodiment to communicative efforts. Cliodhna O'Connor explains SRT as a way to

> explore the socially shared common-sense knowledge that permeates everyday thought, feeling and behaviour (…) Social representations are conceived as residing across rather than within individual minds, inhabiting the 'between-space' where individual and society connect. (O'Connor, 2016: 3-4)

SRT is considered both private, how the individual views themselves though sensory experiences, and public, how the individual has meaning imposed through external social sources (O'Connor 2016). In relation to embodiment, SRT may allow the communication of complex and abstract ideas through performative acts that engage with corporeal orature. I use corporeal orature to move away from formal structures of spoken language and instead attempt to analyze the presentation and engagement of the body through a culturally specific lens. It engages with analysis through theories of communication, literature, politics, social interactions, heritage, etc. to understand potential meanings that are embedded within a performance. Corporeal orature is expressed differently through each of the generations explored through this research.

Black cultural theorists also tackle the ideas of embodied cultural meaning in relation to communication. Each of these following examples relate to the concept of corporeal orature when connected to the efforts of communication through images of the physical body. According to DeFrantz's (2004) discussion on activist and academic W.E.B Du Bois' theory of double consciousness, Black social dances may hold two meanings, one that is publicly visible for all audiences, and a hidden meaning for Black audiences. Du Bois explains that double consciousness comes from the idea that the Black person in the Americas is "always looking at one's self through the eyes of others…" (2007: 8). This concept is built out of the reality of the oppressed Black person in the US but is applicable to other colonial and imperialist systems. Du Bois is also credited with the concept of racial uplift, which is reflected in Overton Walker's writing from 1906. Racial uplift looks at "the Talented Tenth [of African Americans which] pulls all that are worth saving to their vantage ground" (Du Bois, 2007: 193). In relation to embodiment, Overton Walker (1906) notes key concepts such as talent and individual disposition as being relevant to achieving the social political goals of the Black race. Henry Gates Jr. coined the term 'signifyin'', which in the Black vernacular describes an instance that may take on a different meaning through Black critical discourse and understanding than what emerges through the white gaze. Though this started as a spoken and literary technique, it can be applied across a variety of Black interpretive media that conveys a separate message to Black communities which may otherwise be misinterpreted by other racial communities. Signifyin' mostly operates through specific communicative contexts, often moments of parody or pastiche, and holds specific characteristics such as indirection or punning (Gates 1988). Corporeal orature as a concept works to draw each of these theoretical ideas together under one umbrella, backed with psychological concepts that support the possibilities of culturally specific interpretations.

This work in reinstantiating the performance and imagery of the Cakewalk through different moments in time also acts as a mode of claiming ownership through the recognition of the history of the performances. Brenda Dixon Gottschild (2000) notes

that in the appropriation of Black dance styles critics and reviewers of 'negro' musical revues in the 1930s were critical of Black performers using white dance styles within their performances because of a lack of knowledge on how the dances came to be seen on the stage. Gottschild (2000: 74) also cites dance historian Ernie Smith stating that this ignorance about the origins of Black dances is seeded from racist ideas of "black talent, ideas, interests, intelligence, and potential…" which resulted in the "separation of black dance from black ownership". Still today in the US and the UK, dances that are deemed to be social or folk dances are unable to be cleared for copyright because of their lack of choreographic score. This is because the current law does not allow the copyright of individual dance steps, but only choreographed phrases which must be recorded in some form. In general, this may not be an issue for dances passed through and within communities because it allows for the growth and innovation of the dance form. The issues of appropriation of Black dances such as the Cakewalk enters when the original community that crafted the performance goes unrecognized or misrepresented. Historically, the labels of 'folk' and 'social' dances have been used to describe the works of marginalized communities, allowing imperialist control and theft by the dominant culture of traditional performance (Kraut 2016). White minstrel performers instead donned blackface to perform a parody of what they assumed was authentic behavior, using their minstrel performance to claim originality over Black performance (Kraut 2016). The inability of Black American communities to claim this form of performance further relates to issues in historical knowledge and representation of Black dance in mainstream culture. Alessandra Raengo's concept of liquid blackness explains how Black culture can come to be separated and estranged from the community that creates it:

> …blackness flows from the subject to the object and appears as a quality that is acquirable, purchasable, fungible, without regard for people, modes of existence, and concrete living experience (Raengo, 2014: 5).

Raengo notes here how blackness becomes a commodity and may be separated from the black body, allowing the culture to be decontextualized from its performative intentions. Naomi Macalalad Bragin reinforces how as "a calculated strategy of whiteness to overlook black social activity by consuming and exchanging culture as an object", the viewing of Black culture as a noun (object) rather than a verb (lived experience) allows whites to remove Black culture from its context (2023: 348). As she summarizes, "everyone can love black culture so long as black social life is assumed to be immanently exclusionary and valueless" (2023: 348).

Inasmuch as Smith argues that the Lindy Hop being a Black dance "created by African Americans from their African heritage and their experiences living in America" (Smith, cited by Gottschild, 2000: 74-75) the Cakewalk was also created by African Americans in their experiences through slavery. Because American whites refused to acknowledge

the impact that slavery had on conceiving this performance, and how the history of Black slavery negatively impacted African Americans, Black American slaves created a performance that related their grievances through satirical style known as signifyin' (as discussed above). Jane Desmond (1997) explores the context in which signifyin' is relayed (without naming it as such) in recalling the history of the Cakewalk, where Black performance cites white movement as a form of mimicry, engaging with it in a transformational context that makes it uniquely Black. Starting with a brief overview of the Cakewalk, this article explores the history and presentation of the Cakewalk through Aida Overton Walker and Heather Agyepong, primarily investigating how they have changed and reclaimed the Cakewalk using corporeal orature.

Origins of the Cakewalk

> The Cake-walk was originally performed by enslaved people who mocked and mimicked their slave owners and high society. The dance involved couples in square formations, strutting, prancing and high kicking. It is unclear whether the slave owners understood the connotation but nevertheless enjoyed the performances so much that they held contests for the performers. (Agyepong 2021)

The Cakewalk was originally a subversive performance from the pre-Civil War era and allowed slaves to carry over elements from West African traditional dance ceremonies (Krasner 1996). The original performance of the Cakewalk engages the literary technique of signifyin' through both its movements and music, where it took the acts of high-society white people and transformed them into movement in a coding that mocked the performance of whiteness to other Black people (Archer-Straw 2000; Baldwin 1981; Glass 2007; Pugh 2015). The Cakewalk originated as a community-centric performance before it was 'discovered' by white slaveowners, perhaps started as a mode of communal sharing and radical joy as Jessica Lu and Catherine Steele argue (2019). Lu and Steele cite activist and online writer Brittany Packnett in saying "Joy is resistance. Oppression doesn't have room for your happiness. You resist it when you find Joy anyhow" (2019: 823). For Black slaves, the Cakewalk was possibly one way to build community, entertainment, and culture under harsh oppressive conditions.

The dance later became popular performance among white slave owners, encouraging its performance as a form of Africanist tradition as well as engaging in it as a form of minstrelsy (Glass 2007). Canadian Poet Laureate Dionne Brand (2002: 80) notes that when [white] audiences see a performance they like from minorities, they encourage the proliferation of those identities through performance so that "representation becomes a stereotype". With these ideas Brand takes hold of a central concept of how the Cakewalk became popular during the era of slavery. David Krasner cites Chuck Kleinhans' explanation on the dual interpretation of the Cakewalk as

> "the stage representation contributed to the racist myth of the happy plantation", while, at another level, the dance sustained a subtextual message of ridicule. Everyone laughed during the dance, but, Kleinhans adds, "one side laughed differently from the other" (Kleinhans, cited in Krasner, 1996: 70-71).

In this way, the Cakewalk holds a double consciousness, where the Black performer knows their own intention embedded into the performance, but also understands that the white viewer may not be aware of those intentions. Krasner states that "Decoding the cakewalk depended entirely on the audience/performer relationship: who was dancing, who was observing, and in what historic juncture the dance was being assessed became critical components of evaluation" (1996: 72). White audiences turned a Black social and performative movement style into a competition and full performance for their own entertainment, misconstruing the meaning of the original engagement and building their own narrative of Black communities. This was the start of a history of appropriation and reclamation that would continue for the next couple and centuries, where American whites mistook and misconstrued Black American performance, as dance historian Megan Pugh states:

> Amateur white European cakewalkers were imitating professional Black American cakewalkers, who were imitating white minstrel cakewalkers imitating Black slaves imitating their masters, who were unable to recognize that they were being mocked. (Pugh, 2015: 23).

By the 1870s the Cakewalk had made its way from south to north through the migration of emancipated Black Americans and in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the Cakewalk rose in popularity again (Pugh 2015; Scheper 2016). As a part of the finale of *The Creole Show* in 1889, well known Cakewalker Dora Dean would perform the dance alongside her husband Charles Johnson (Emery 1988). *The Creole Show* is one of the first productions in this time to omit blackface and introduce women into its all-Black cast and was a predecessor to other later famous musicals featuring the Cakewalk (Emery 1988; Kreol n.d.). Dean was well known for performing the Cakewalk in these early years alongside Johnson and became the first African American couple to perform on Broadway. Aida Overton Walker, Bert Williams, and George Walker were later recognized as its "greatest choreographers" (Dean n.d.; Krasner 1996).

The Cakewalk also provided an avenue for African-Americans to access the white performance stage (Gottschild 2000). On July 5th, 1898, the Cakewalk first appeared on a Broadway stage in the production of the all-Black musical, *Clorindy: The origin of the Cakewalk*, with lyrics by Paul Laurence Dunbar and music by Will Marion Cook (Taylor & Rush 2023). It unfortunately took a long time from being written to make it to the stage, until white producer Edward Wright "agreed to give the show a chance" (Bañagale, Hayward, & Goodwin, 2016:n.p.). The rise in popularity of the Cakewalk coincided with the search for a national dance to represent America in the late 1800s

and early 1900s. In 1908 at the first International Conference of Dancing Masters, the Cakewalk (mixed with the two-step) was presented as a representation of American dance, despite the protest that the dance was considered undignified, too easy, or too silly with the implication being that the dance was "too black" (Pugh, 2015: 12).

The influences of aesthetics from African dances can be seen within the Cakewalk such as its use of satire and humor to make social commentaries, which "provided the community a way to laugh at the irony found in difficult situations" (Knowles, 2002: 24). The dance also utilizes similar swinging movements, engaging in a pendulum-like movement as dancers move back and forth consisting of gliding, shuffling, and dragging steps (Knowles 2002; Krasner 1996). The Cakewalk cites other Black and traditional African performance such as the Ring Shout, marked by the movements of flat-footed shuffles, tapping, clapping, and arm waving and described by Pugh as "percussive steps done in a circle" and further traced back to the African Circle Dance by jazz historian Marshall Stearns (Baldwin, 1981; Durkin, 2019; Pugh, 2015: 17). The Cakewalk was also known by other names historically, such as the chalk line walk, the walk-about, or the strut (Knowles 2002, Krasner 1996). The original performance was done as "a straight walk on a patch made by turns… dancers made their way with a pail of water on their heads. The couple that was most erect and spilled the least or no water was the winner" (Knowles, 2002: 44). As it developed, the performance combined movement that was brought over to America by enslaved Africans with a mimicry of white social performance and a variety of stunts (Pugh 2015). Archer-Straw states that the Cakewalk was "based on a formal *quadrille d'honneur* and was performed by blacks in fancy dress who mimicked high-society 'white folks'" (2000: 44), however, this interpretation of the performance may be more based on the Cakewalk before the 1900s and may not sufficiently reflect on its history before it hit the popular stage (Krasner 1996). From the perspective of someone from the 1900s, Overton Walker (2018 [1903]: n.p.) described the Cakewalk as a "gala dance" and she explains her performance of the dance in a 1903 article "as a march you improvise". In keeping this improvisation, Overton Walker stays in line with the original African influences of the dance while still allowing a stylization and structure to the performance, yet she also notes that the steps of the Cakewalk are "of American origin, whatever the original idea may have been" (Knowles, 2002: 23; Krasner, 1996: 70). Further movement analysis reveals that

> In dancing, all the muscles of the body are brought into play, any effort or fatigue is concealed, the shoulders thrown well back, the back curved, and the knees bent with suppleness. The swing, all jauntiness and graceful poise, must come from the shoulders, and the toes must turn well out. The tempo is between the two-step and the march six-eight time (Overton Walker 2018[1903]: n.p.).

There are other important thematic points to the Cakewalk in Overton Walker's description, including the development of improvised technique, an "interested and joyous" temperament, and muscular control (Overton Walker, 2018 [1903]:n.p.). As discussed above, the mention of a 'joyous' temperament could be a sign of black resistance through the history of this performance while also being noted along with the lack of fatigue as an Africanist aesthetic of high-affect (Gottschild 1996). Knowles (2002) highlights choreographic commonalities such as the bent knees, use of improvisation, and the use of six-eight time characteristic of African dance forms. Aspects of impersonation and mockery in performance are also linked to African styles (although instead of animals, white people are being impersonated).

Although the Cakewalk is recognized as a Black art within this article, it is important to acknowledge the ways that Black performers were denied both the narrative and engagement of this performance. The narrative was stripped away through the white public sphere that assumed the Cakewalk was a performance that imitated whites out of a sense of desire, rather than satire. This version spread among white slave owners may be in part what encouraged them to engage with the Cakewalk insofar as to even provide cakes to the winners. Post-slavery, Black performing artists were denied the ability to perform on white stages. Meanwhile, white minstrel and theater performers presented themselves in blackface on stage to create parodies of Black people while engaging in performances such as the Cakewalk (Krasner 2011). When Black performers were allowed to perform the Cakewalk on a white stage they usually had to wear blackface, forced to also create parodies of their own cultures and communities (Krasner 2011). Their own productions were denied the opportunity to be presented on white stages, though shows such as *Clorindy: The Origin of the Cakewalk* and *In Dahomey* proved exceptions for this time (Bañagale, et al. 2016). While the Cakewalk is of Black origin, white society dominated as performance gatekeepers.

Aida Overton Walker teaches the Cakewalk

In the early 1900s Overton Walker became well known for her performance of the Cakewalk, alongside her husband George Walker and his performance partner Bert Williams. Her rise to recognition came in the show *In Dahomey*, which originally did not feature the Cakewalk, but was later inserted because of its popularity (Glass 2007). She became famous for performing and teaching white audiences the Cakewalk in the US and Europe, even at Buckingham Palace in a private performance of *In Dahomey* for the royal family (Krasner 1996). Overton Walker proliferated a performance that was potentially misunderstood by white audiences as an 'authentic' form of Black dance while also ironically teaching whites a form of movement that mocked whiteness (Agyepong 2021; Krasner 1996, 1997; Pugh 2015). She became a popular teacher among high-society white women and emphasized "grace and suppleness" in

her teachings rather than more extravagant movement (Krasner, 1996; Pugh, 2015: 20). Agyepong (2021) notes that Overton Walker's performances depict a "modest femininity" during a time when Black women were depicted humorously or overtly sexualized on the stage. Krasner (1996) believed that Overton Walker's ability to read and understand her audiences allowed her to engage in "articulated and embodied discourse as an instrument of self-representation", showing that the interpretation of her Cakewalk was an intentional presentation to both Black and white audiences as a ploy for acceptability.

Overton Walker used her Cakewalk performances for white audiences as a way of gaining upwards social mobility through Du Bois's racial uplift movement, which believed that conformity to standards of white middle-class gender roles and sexuality would prove that Black people were respectable and deserving of equal civil and political rights (Hill 2010; Krasner 1996). Other scholars note that she choreographed *In Dahomey* in accordance with this racial uplift agenda, subtly challenging racial prejudice (Mayes & Whitfield 2023). As she explained, "When a large audience leaves a theatre after a creditable two hours and a half performance by Negroes [sic], I am sure the Negro [sic] race is raised in the estimation of the people" (Overton Walker, 1906: 571). As with her co-star, Williams, Overton Walker saw her performance as part of a movement for acceptance and equality through her constant interactions with large audiences of different races. However, she faced resistance from within her community from those who saw the Cakewalk as beneath the Black race and as a derogatory spectacle for those who believed that actresses were morally unfit (Krasner 1996). Overton Walker, perhaps in response to these arguments, stated did not believe that stage life was for everybody. She only encouraged women "of good thoughts and habits, [who] chooses the Stage for the love of the profession and professional work" (Overton Walker, 1906: 574). She worked to shift the view of the Black community on the Cakewalk by redefining its choreographic practice and often described her performance as imbuing the movement of the Cakewalk with grace. This in part meant that she did not perform with the same tricks that some of her contemporaries did such as balancing acts or brandishing props in her performances (Pugh 2016). However, Overton Walker also focuses on embodying grace through elastic movements from the knees and the curve of the back, as well as emphasizing fluidity in movement (Krasner 1996). The overall emphasis on grace in her writing may be insufficient to analyze Overton Walker's performance. Although it is described as such many times by herself and other reviewers, there are no archival recordings of her performances. Her embodiment of grace may yet be forever lost to time.

There are a variety of ways that we may be able to read Overton Walker's proliferation of the Cakewalk as intentionally political. Bragin notes that "Black vernacular dance calls on practitioners to sustain intimate, meaningful conversations that stay relevant

to active and changing community traditions, values, and expectations" (2023: 349). This article has already explored how Overton Walker discussed the choreographic technique of the Cakewalk. What may go less recognized is that she also wrote about performing in political ways:

> In this age we are all fighting the one problem-that is the color problem! I venture to think and dare to state that our profession does more toward the alleviation of color prejudice than any other profession among colored people. (Overton Walker, 1906: 571)

Other scholars highlight how Overton Walker performed with the intention to resist (Mayes & Whitfield 2023; Krasner 1996). Her ability to embody the Cakewalk as a premiere professional acted as a point of access and self-exposure as it gained her audiences with high society white persons that in her words "other members of my race in other professions would have a hard task in gaining if they ever did." (Overton Walker, 1906: 571). She may have also recognized the intersectional difference of how being a Black woman impacted her, telling men "good men help women to be good; and remember also that in helping women you are really helping yourselves" (Overton Walker, 1906: 575). It then makes sense that Overton Walker was amongst those who "mentored innumerable girls and young women as they shifted African American musical theatre away from its racist roots in minstrelsy" (Jeanne Klein, cited by Mayes & Whitfield, 2021: 37). Through Overton Walker the Cakewalk transforms for Black communities, signaling a movement for equality through the autonomy of the Black body to present itself and its work. For white communities, it embeds a social acceptance which then allows access to white performance spaces. By ingraining ideas of 'grace and suppleness' into her Cakewalk performance and enacting the dance with a 'modest femininity' Overton Walker was not only presenting herself for the white gaze, but also engaging in a political and social message about the standing of the Black race itself in accordance with the racial uplift values of Du Bois. In this sense her performance holds a double consciousness, communicating to white communities that Black talent belongs in the mainstream while performing a dance that Black communities recognize as mocking whiteness.

However, whatever interest and acceptance that Overton Walker may have garnered may have been obscured by the negrophilia that came both before and afterwards. In the popularity of the Cakewalk, depictions of the performers on postcards were distributed around Europe, some of which portrayed African Americans through racist imagery or through racial stereotypes (Agyepong 2021; Caddy 2007). Though these performances were pushed as a movement for equality through the centering of Black people on stage and in wealthy white circles, there was a narrative conflict of body politic as those presenting themselves on stage had their agency removed through the circulation of these racist postcards, which reframed the portrayal engaged through the performance.

Negrophilia, Black Imagery, and Capturing the Cakewalk

Though Overton Walker may have performed the Cakewalk internationally, the spread of the popularity of the Cakewalk, and other forms and styles of Black culture along with it, may have come from the export of American imagery of Black entertainers outside the US (Archer-Straw 2000). The popularity of Black culture from the late 1800s through to the 1900s is called negrophilia, noted by Petrine Archer-Straw as a cultural understanding of "white people's own ideas about blacks, rather than an accurate reading of black culture itself" which impacted modern art (2000: 20-21). During this period there is a popularization of Black imagery depicting a number of activities and through a variety of formats, including the Cakewalk (Agyepong 2021, Archer-Straw 2000, Baldwin 1981). Agyepong's work situates negrophilia as a cultural occurrence particularly within the French Avant Garde.

Brooke Baldwin (1981) notes that Cakewalk imagery was used as a stereotype of Black people, meant to both sell products and entertain, as black subjects were not only a popular category of cards, but also toys and games, and even films. In stating that photography and film may lend an air of realism to stereotypical imagery of the Cakewalk, Baldwin (1981) encourages us to consider who is behind the creation of images now considered archival, many of which were produced by whites during a period of segregation (in the US). Through archival research, Agyepong (2021) discusses the erasure of the subjects captured within specific postcard images labeled 'Le Cake-Walk' (The Cakewalk), where both the images and those who archived them used reductive language in the description attached to each image. Agyepong notes that over time, the images depicting the Cakewalk not only become more problematic, but also racist, which removes the power that the Black imagery may have originally communicated through the postcards. In some postcards, white people are shown doing the Cakewalk in a way that makes fun of Black performance. Other postcards depict Cakewalkers as animals such as monkeys, making racist comparisons of Black persons to animals.

Heather Agyepong Recaptures the Past

> Can I use the therapeutic framework… of looking back to heal yourself. Can I look back with archives to inform myself of who I am and in exploring different versions of who I am? Can there be a source of inspiration? (Agyepong, 2021).

Wish You Were Here restages the postcards that were created in the early 1900s depicting the Cakewalk through racist imagery, reframing the intent using Agyepong's own body. In an online talk of the postcard recreations, Agyepong (2021) expresses her anxiety and ideas of satire while trying to make concepts of mental health visible through the gaze. She does not simply respond to the postcards from the past with her body, but also makes new ones that interpret the Black performing body through her

own agency, placing her in control of the representation by depicting Black femininity (and masculinity) in photographic imagery. Agyepong's body signifies the histories of successful Black women being depicted through a self-built narrative and attempts to recall positive Black figures of the past to be representations in the present, which she accomplishes through the corporeal orature. Agyepong (2021) notes that through her upbringing "there were looks and gestures that meant so much", speaking on the physicality of communication in relation to the capture of Black performance. The intention of this corporeal orature is expressed through her understanding of physical communication from her Ghanaian heritage, in which specific gestures and movements convey cultural meanings that might only be fully understood by those of similar heritage. Similarly, Agyepong uses her own body to create imagery that may be understood differently by people who identify with her gender, racial, or ethnic background. She purposely embeds interpretive meanings in her works that are meant to relay emotion, feeling, and connection as well as redefine who narrates the meaning of the "Le Cakewalk" through these postcards. She also facilitates their use for people to communicate with others through the visual media of her body in postcard form, allowing people to send their own messages embedded within the orature of her own body, engaging a dual form of communication and meaning through written and visual media.

Agyepong's work also intersects many notions of archive. As discussed above, the artwork engages what Foster calls "an archival impulse", where the work looks to, remembers, and reinscribes the past with new meaning (2004: 4). Although Baldwin (1981) was skeptical about ability of the imagery of the Cakewalk to be more than a depiction of a stereotype because of the lack of knowledge over the identity of the producer in the early 1900s, Agyepong's imagery not only gives us certainty that the producer is a Black woman, but also engages in a multi-pronged revelation about the archive by:

1. Making a direct connection from her artistic work to historical imagery, connecting her art to historical research and the archive.

2. Reinscribing meaning to the archive itself through her personal and embodied experience of engaging with research and creation.

3. Adding to the archive and building upon the histories already there through modern artistic creations.

Unpacking each of these points below offers a greater sense of the work that Agyepong has produced and how it may reinscribe the archive in liberatory ways.

1. Making a direct connection…

The new postcards created by Agyepong directly reference the archival postcards in several ways. The clearest way is the format of her postcards, which mirror the historical postcards in language and formatting by using the title of 'Le Cake-walk', engaging in a numbering convention for her cards on the bottom left, setting initials in the bottom right (it is unclear what these initials stand for), and using a sepia color to resemble historical photographic prints. The biggest difference in this formatting is that rather than using the sub-caption 'Dansè au Nouveau Cirque. Les Nègres', her own caption relays a form of intent with the photograph. She also refers to past historical events in some postcards, such as #1 entitled *Rob This England*, depicting Agyepong in a replica royal English crown and robe, directly referencing Overton Walker having performed and taught the Cakewalk at Buckingham Palace. Postcards #2, *Razzle Dazzle*, and #7, *B***h Better*, present Agyepong in drag, which was not uncommon for some of the archival postcard imagery. Within her lecture she discusses the history of William Dorsey Swann, who was "'The Queen' of a secret world of drag balls in Washington DC in the 1880s" (Agyepong, 2021). She also notes in her work that it is a nod to Overton Walker, who also performed in drag at times after her husband George Walker's death (Agyepong 2023; Library of Congress, n.d.; Thorne 2015).

2. Reinscribing Meaning…

Overton Walker looked to reinscribe meaning into the Cakewalk by redefining how the dance is performed in the public eye. Agyepong also reinscribes meaning through Black media tropes and messaging using imagery of her own body. Part of what inspired her imagery comes from Black cultural production in gif and meme culture, which is shown through her postcards 8.1, 8.2, and 8.3 entitled *Anne Mae* (Agyepong, 2021). These three specific images present themselves together as a visual narrative of movement. The juxtaposition of her own corporeal orature alongside the title of the Cakewalk in these postcards also engage in a form of meme culture, in which rather than relying on text and language to present different meanings to contextual imagery, the images embody different meanings for the viewer. Much like gifs and memes communicate via digital spaces, individuals may send postcards to friends on which they may or may not inscribe notes and messages, using Agyepong's imagery to convey a message to the recipient.

> We know that the gif is not representing our actual body… but by using a reaction gif, we cast ourselves as another body and into its affective and emotional performance of reception (Hautsch & Cook, 2021: 75).

Agyepong's work tries to embed social relationships between image and ideas, actively changing the idea of the Cakewalk to embody a whole new set of concepts around embodied transmission of meanings, whether it is the relation of trauma,

successes, anxieties, self-worth, or beauty. Viewers may relate to what Agyepong is trying to convey because these are experiences that viewers feel in their own bodies (Hautsch & Cook 2021). However, because of cultural differences in race, gender, and sexuality, some of this messaging may continue to be lost on non-Black audiences. Whatever the interpretations, rather than the term Cakewalk being confined specifically to the dance, it also takes on new political life in the negotiation of Black representation through reclamation of the visual concept. Psychological research has suggested that imagery like memes can "frame issues, inform people, space attitudes, and mobilize various forms of political action", while work in social identity and relative depravation research "demonstrate[s] the ways in which the social sharing of information, emotions, and intentions can reinforce individual psychology…" (Leach & Allen, 2017: 544). The social implications of Agepong's imagery could mean that they assist others who identify with her in processing and understanding the same emotions that she attempts to relay.

3. Adding to the Archive…

Agyepong's work builds upon the archive by adding new imagery, information, and modes of presentation. Her imagery presents new items to engage with when looking at the history of the Cakewalk and how it continues to impact art and performance today. Our knowledge of the Cakewalk is enhanced by how Agyepong adds new dimensions through her own experiences, engages in dialogue with the past through the production of works, and brings knowledge of the Cakewalk back to popular culture. Her modes of dissemination, including verbal presentations, digital platforms such as her website, and curated exhibitions, all allow for the broad distribution of the archive to the public for access to this history.

Her exhibition at the time of the writing of this article is set at the *Centre for British Photography* and supported by the Hyman Foundation. Set in a donation-based exhibition center, entry is free, allowing access to the collection to the public. The exhibition includes a video interview on Agyepong's work which expands on the contextualization and history of the archive. Exhibitions such as this one, *London Art Fair: Photo 50,* the digital exhibition for *Foam Talent 2021*, continue to broaden access and attention to the work as well as call forth the history of the Cakewalk. In doing so, Agyepong's exhibition continually engages as a reminder of what the Cakewalk was, bringing it back into popular culture, encouraging education around it, and bringing the performance out of academic centric circles into the public eye.

A Narrative for the Present

Each embodiment of the Cakewalk through history adds to the identity of the performance by shifting how the performance is represented to audiences within

popular culture. The original Cakewalk performances embodied satirical meanings in signifyin' ways as an act of resistance to slave owners. Once white people started performing the Cakewalk on the stage using minstrel makeup for entertainment, Black performers such as Aida Overton Walker reclaimed the Cakewalk by redefining how it was performed and seen on the stage. Not only did she rise to prominence through her performances, but she also redefined the understanding of Black artists creativity and capabilities, fulfilling W.E.B. Du Bois' political ideals of racial uplift through corporeal orature. Agyepong's work responds to the derogatory negrophilic imagery that contradicted Overton Walker's progress. Engaging with a dual role through revival and reinscription, Agyepong takes control of the visual narrative of Black people by both responding to and renegotiating the postcard imagery while also engaging in a therapeutic practice that revives historical narratives of Black autonomy and success. In rewriting media narratives through the body, she re-empowers the artistic works of the past and reclaims control of their own narrative of the Cakewalk as well as Black bodies. Through corporeal orature in each of these historical instances, the Black body signifies the reality of Black lives presented through Black narratives, rather than through a white distortion. They also signify to white audiences the histories of erasure that Black artists have experienced over the years.

In reaching back to the past, Agyepong as an artist also becomes a historian while simultaneously building upon and adding to the archive of work and the legacy that unfolds from it. She also represents reclaimed autonomy of the Black body in the ability to define and present herself while discussing the past and the violence done upon Black people through racist depictions and descriptions that still can be found today. Corporeal orature through these instances are acts of resistance to proliferated narratives of Blackness through white communities. Through this research, each subsequent performance adds to the narrative presented in an effort to revise the white gaze within their practice while also engaging in a form of narrative correction and healing within their own community. In this way, each of these performances get recognized for the revolutionary acts that they were and the erasure that history engaged with around them.

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