

Examining Contemporary Gumboot Dancers: Continuing Performances of Masculinity in Historically Oppressive Spaces

Visual Text: “Lucky Lartey, INFUSION Cast Talk” (2021)



<https://www.luckylartey.com.au/about>

This essay will explore how dance has continued to act as a unique space in which men of African descent are free to create and express their own individuality as well as collectivism. Dance serves as a space in which individuals can engage in a negotiation of self in the spaces that oppress them. As a result, I will study Lucky Lartey as a Black male performer based in Australia. It is crucial to highlight the significance of Lartey choosing to “take control” over a space like the Sydney Opera House; a multi-venue performing arts center, housing a complex web of theaters and halls linked beneath its famous white roof, formally opened by Queen Elizabeth II on October 20th, 1973. It is necessary to examine similarities between a negotiation of self in spaces that were initially created to oppress Black men like an Opera House and the

South African gold mines. It is evident that dance is one space in which people, and Black men specifically, have the freedom to express themselves in terms of their gestures, style, and costumes in a performance context. Overall, theoretical readings on African masculinities will give substance to the context of this paper. It will detail “*what is at stake?*” when discussing the process of negotiating a sense of self through dance, particularly in spaces that have historically oppressed Black bodies.

For the purposes of this paper, my literary analysis and visual examination will revolve around the performance of the traditional African dance style, *gumboot*. This essay will ask “what is at stake” politically and socially, in contemporary representations of masculinity throughout the African diaspora. Furthermore, I will explore how dance produces political reflections on the social realm by invoking André Lepecki’s research on the mobilization of action and thought into a “choreography of resistance,” more thoroughly analyzed in his book, *Of the Presence of the Body, Essays on Dance and Performance Theory* (2004) as well as Stuart Hall’s detailed exploration of exhibiting masculinity and uncovering visual codes of masculinity in his text, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practice* (1997). To further a discussion on masculinity and interpretive perceptions of manhood that are told by engaging in specific gestures and movements, I will closely analyze gestures suggesting masculinity in sections of the text, “Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on men and mainstream cinema,” written by Steve Neale in 1983. On the other hand, to move into a literary study of gumboot dancing, I will refer to a wealth of resources on the literature of gumboot dancing in relation to labor history in South Africa including, Louise Meintjes’ text, “Shoot the Sergeant, Shatter the Mountain: The Production of Masculinity in Zulu Ngoma Song and Dance in Post-Apartheid South Africa,”

“Gumboots, Bhaca Migrants, and Fred Astaire: South African Worker Dance and Musical Style,” *African Music*, written by Carol Muller and Janet Topp Fragon as well as an extensive text on South African migrant workers’ experiences authored by Luli Callinicos. To begin this literary analysis, I will note how Callinicos analyzes the cultural systems and societal frameworks that led to the production of the gumboot dance tradition. Later in the essay, I will examine Callinicos research in his text, *Gold, and Workers* (1985). Intriguingly, in Chapter 16, Callinicos details the many ways in which South African men resisted exploitation.

After further research, it became apparent that there is a gap in the literature that documents the intricate role that the legacy of gumboot dancing plays in continuing performances of masculinity in oppressed spaces. As a result, I will argue that by highlighting Lartey’s career as a contemporary Sydney-based dancer and choreographer (originally from Ghana, West Africa) and his instructional video on gumboot dancing, we can ask two key questions— 1) How have interpretations of the gumboot tradition by male dancers (in the twenty-first century) continued aspects of the gumboot dance tradition? 2) How is masculinity expressed in contemporary dancing, particularly in their performances of the gumboot dance tradition? In brief, through a historiographical analysis of African masculinities and an in-depth investigation on the performative aspects of Lartey’s interpretation of gumboot dancing— I can study contemporary movement practices in relation to masculinity and its function in the social realm.

Lartey is one example of the extensive pool of contemporary male dancers who continue to engage in forms of African masculinity based on the precision of their gestures and through their choreographed movements. For the purposes of this essay, choreography is defined as a term

first used in the twentieth century as a means to transcribe physical representations of musicality. By deciphering the rhythm, tone, lyrics, texture, and melodies of a song through dance, the choreographer can gain a more complex understanding of the creative outcome of that process. I will argue that choreography is one form that can allow us to analyze codings¹ of masculinity through dance. The codings of masculinity in these (traditional and contemporary) dance routines privilege attributes of “toughness,” “hardness” and “being in control,” or as Steve Neale states in *Masculinity as a Spectacle*, “there are [visual] codings which do not allow the display of ambiguities, uncertainties, or weaknesses,”² and therefore, for the male actor, offer a space of visibility, control, power, and self-expression. It is important to note that the forms of expression that I am analyzing in literature on gumboot dancing and Lartey’s instructional video are inspired by Neale’s in-depth analysis of performative gestures explored in his text, *Masculinity as a Spectacle*. These gestures include: “toughness” (based on the production of sounds due to the dancers’ stomping), “hardness” (based on the repetitive nature of their practice and routine), and finally, the act of “being in control” (based on the precise timing and measured gestures of the African miners/dancers, also shown throughout Lartey’s instructional video that clearly has a didactic purpose and is designed to impart (and continue) a particular knowledge and skill). I will therefore argue that the specific “knowledge” and “skill” that Lartey is imparting is rooted in the similar qualities of masculinity that South African gumboot dancers accessed in the gold mines.

To summarize, my primary area of interest is in emphasizing how men of African descent have challenged oppressive environments through dance, both in the past and in the present. For the

¹Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage Publ. (1997) 2011

²Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practice*.

purposes of this paper, I will focus my analysis on oppressive spaces like the Sydney Opera House (opened in 1973) and the South African Gold Mines (discovered in 1884). Through a close analysis of “masculinity,” I can study two distinct groups (based on gender, nationality, occupation, and ethnicity) navigating oppressive spaces; these two groups include: South African gold miners and contemporary dancers with a focus on Ghanaian-born choreographer, Lucky Lartey. While conducting this literary analysis, I examined how South African miners and Lartey each engage in similar forms of African masculinity (based on the specificity of their movements), particularly as social performances (shown outside the realm of politics) and through dance practices. In sum, the construction of choreographies is a creative and expressive way that men of African descent have used to move through repressive contexts. By moving together in a synchronized and coordinated manner, these men can create a sense of unity and power that transcends the physical and psychological barriers imposed on them by the repressive system. As a result, through their choreographies (specifically of the gumboot dance tradition), Afro-descended people can reclaim their agency and dignity, and to assert their right to exist and thrive in a world that sought to deny them that right.

To offer a clearer and more compelling explanation on why I am choosing to analyze the Sydney Opera House as well as Lartey as a contemporary choreographer, it is crucial to note the ways in which this essay focuses primarily on literature that explores modern performances of race and gender (through dance). In doing so, I can more effectively examine literature that describes the ways in which two distinct spaces have engaged in historically oppressive practices. Therefore, I have chosen to analyze Lartey because his role as a choreographer is reflective of key aspects of global dispersion as well as the development of common cultural forms expressed by miners in

South Africa. In other words, Lartey's choice to highlight the gumboot dance tradition shows the ways in which the African Diaspora has resulted in the spread of African culture, music, religion, dance, and other significant forms of self-expression. To be more precise, as a West African artist, Lartey has studied aspects of traditional dance forms that began in South Africa and carried these practices to a Western context (Sydney, Australia). Arguably, Lartey has continued and sparked an interesting juxtaposition of masculinity and self-expression that must be examined in a broader context that relies on scholarly research in Theatre and Performance Studies, History, and Gender Studies. Additionally, I am interested in studying the environmental factors that led to the creation of gumboot dancing. Thus, the two spaces of my comparative literary analysis include: 1) The gold mines in South Africa (twentieth century) and 2) An Opera House in Sydney, Australia (twenty-first century). To explore intersections of race and resistance in the multifaceted genre of Opera, I will indirectly refer to Naomi Andre's book, *Blackness in Opera (2014)*. Here, I will note how contributors to this text have used an interdisciplinary approach to explore questions on how Blackness has been traditionally represented in theatrical spaces by studying 1) Issues surrounding characterization practices of Black people, 2) Interpretation of racialized roles by Blacks and whites, 3) Controversies over race in the theater and the use of black face, extensions of Blackness and its connection to the grand Opera, musical theater, film and now, dance. In closing, we must first contextualize the role of self-expression by examining readings on African masculinities in South Africa, and then strengthen our understanding of Lartey as a current Dancer, Choreographer & Visual Artist at the forefront of exploring intercultural dance practices as part of performance spaces in Sydney, Australia.

Readings in African Masculinities:

South African Worker Dance

When examining readings on African masculinities in South African gold mines, I studied the ways in which miners were laboriously subjected to the strictly governed and highly segregated mining culture. For instance, I found that in situations of subjugation, leaders in positions of power often prescribed to their subjects a fixed way of expressing themselves. In this case, there were two main ways in which the diversity of African miners were homogenized: 1) Miners could only return home when their contracts were completed 2) The white men who employed them simultaneously replaced their conventional dress with overalls and restricted the miners' use of distinct dialect languages. Subsequently— when gumboots were given to protect workers from hazardous conditions— as a means of self-expression, miners created rhythmic patterns with their feet by stomping, clapping, and slapping their boots. Nearly one century later, gumboot dancing has continued as a blend of various cultural influences including Bhaca, Yao, Zulu, Xhosa, and many others. Currently, gumboot dancing is most well-known as a modern step dance routine that “originated” in African American fraternities and sororities; they have also been popularized in mainstream hip-hop culture. I'm interested in centering my analysis on one instructional dance video on *YouTube* led by Ghanaian-born and Australian-based choreographer, Lucky Lartey. Prior to studying the choreographic significance of gumboot dancing and the ways in which its combined influences became a cultural expression that symbolizes not only African diasporic solidarity, but also continuing performances of African masculinities in our contemporary society, we must take a deeper dive into the role of gumboot dance and South African goldmines in the twentieth century.

As previously mentioned, Callinicos explores the significance of labor history in Africa in his text, *Gold, and Workers* (1985). More specifically, in his piece (chapter 16), Callinicos details how there are many ways in which exploitation can be resisted. We must first study the role of traditional gumboot dance practices to effectively note the ways in which men throughout the African diaspora have found a source of pride and self-respect outside the context of labor. Meticulously, Callinicos explores how amidst oppressive circumstances, African men were able to resist exploitation. Although this chapter does not delve into the specific details of gumboot dancing or its lasting impact, Callinicos does note the other crucial forms of resistance that Black workers on the mines engaged in, to preserve a sense of self and community. For example, while advocating for more rights, the miners' tactics of resistance "against" their employers include: "strikes" (workers united and refused to work while disrupting the flow of production in the mines— like the 1907 strike, and the 1922 strike), "informal resistance," "boycotting the job" (after the mines dropped their wages, thousands of African boys and men looked for work on the railways instead of the mines), "non-cooperation" (miners broke their tools and worked poorly), "beating the system" (some workers used the Chamber of the Mines' recruiting system to travel with the mine-workers and then secretly find better jobs in other places), and "organized resistance," (migrant workers were becoming more experienced as they began to understand the compound system further. As a result, they found more organized ways to protest through work-stoppages and strikes). However, as Callinicos states,

In time, both the government and the Chamber of Mines grew concerned as a growing number of Black workers became aware that "they had power in numbers" (97) ... "You cannot imprison millions,' the resisters declared during

the anti-pass campaign.... Black workers as well as the more educated teachers, ministers and traders were beginning to protest together...”³

It is evident that there are legal implications and politically structured ways in which African migrant workers attempted to advocate for their own well-being. Repeatedly, miners fought to amend the environmental factors that oppressed them, and yet, the hegemonic powers that managed the institution of the gold mines continued to implement structures that allowed Western powers to maintain control. In response to these tyrannical conditionals governed by the state, Black miners found new methods to act independently. In the face of social, cultural, and institutional constraints, South African men organized competitions that served as the arenas through which they could express their masculinity, and ultimately, their need for control. From a Performance Studies lens, I examine these themes of masculinity and agency in a literary analysis grounded in the textual presentation (or written description) of “*toughness*” (based on the production of sounds due to the dancers’ stomping), “*hardness*” (based on the repetitive nature of their practice and routine), and finally, the act of “*being in control*” (based on the precise timing and measured gestures of the traditional African dancers, also shown throughout Lartey’s instructional video that clearly has a didactic purpose and is designed to impart (and continue) a particular knowledge and skill).

To move this analysis forward and into a discussion on gender politics in post-apartheid South Africa, it is necessary to briefly reference Meintjes text, “Shoot the Sergeant, Shatter the

³Luli Callinicos. *Gold and Workers*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985, 97.

Mountain: The Production of Masculinity in Zulu Ngoma Song and Dance in Post-Apartheid South Africa.” *Ethnomusicology Forum* 13. When conducting my literature review on gender expression, I found significant ways of understanding cultural systems (in this specific context) by studying the methodical ways in which African miners expressed their own stylized body movements through dance. For instance, Meintjes notes that “the body” can be situated politically and theorized in “phenomenological ways” (173). For this reason, studying the subjective experience of African migrant workers will provide more insight into the ways in which masculinity does not involve the display of ambiguities, uncertainties, or weaknesses.⁴ Additionally, when studying the historical impact of gumboot dancing it is also crucial to reference a key text written by Muller and Fargion. In their text, “Gumboots, Bhaca Migrants, and Fred Astaire: South African Worker Dance and Musical Style,” *African Music*, Muller and Fargion discuss the ways in which the gumboot style of dance draws on a variety of performances sources that include: ngoma, minstrel performance, popular social dances (“such as those that accompanied jazz music performance in the 1930s and 40s,”⁵ dance styles like the jitterbug and the tap dance popularized through films of Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly). In many instances, Muller and Fargion provide an in-depth literary analysis of the gumboot dance that allows me to examine potential patterns of masculinity. Hall refers to these physical gestures of self-expression as “nonverbal codes” that transmit information using body language and facial expressions. In Hall’s theoretical breakdown of representational practices, it is evident that verbal and nonverbal codes are constructed to convey meaning. In other words, strategically,

⁴Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*.

⁵Carol Muller and Janet Topp Fargion. “Gumboots, Bhaca Migrants, and Fred Astaire: South African Worker Dance and Musical Style.” *African Music*, vol. 7, no. 4, 1999, pp. 88–109.

physical representations of masculinity are ‘working’⁶ to convey certain messages; similarly, the style in which we interpret these cues is equally as important to examine. As a result, it is crucial to note how Muller and Fraigon describe the “aesthetic of gumboot dance performance.” For example, they write—

“The aesthetic of gumboot performance also embodies the regimentation of military marching and the discipline required of labour working underground in the mines. The dancers are expected to respond quickly, without hesitation, regardless of what the leader commands. Precision of movement— starting and ending on the same beat— is crucial to effecting a powerful performance” (90).



Gumboot dancers from Bulwer, mostly Transwerk-Spoornet (railway) employees, at Blanket Mkhize’s homestead, Jan. 1996. Photo: Eric Grau.

To examine these themes of masculinity and agency in a literary analysis grounded in a textual presentation of gumboot dance, I can find intersections between Muller and Fraigon’s analysis in relation to what Neale describes as the display of masculinity through “hardness.” Muller and

⁶Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*.

Fraigon rely on the terms “regimentation,” “military marching” and “discipline” to convey their ideas about the exactness of this collective performance. To move this discussion forward, I have seemingly simplified these terms in a formulaic sense— meaning, based on the repetitive nature of the dancers’ practice and routine— they seem to engage in an aspect of masculinity that is grounded in “hardness” (Neale). In this performance of “hardness,” (Neale) the male actor gains access to a space of visibility. Moreover, as the dancers move towards a more individual and communal source of visibility— their roles as the “leader,” “the stronger dancers,” and the “weaker dancers” are solidified. To illustrate this point, Muller and Fraigon continue their analysis by noting the significance of representation, recognition, and the dancers’ ability to use these (organizational) tools in various contexts. For example, they state,

“While the dancers waited for the leader’s call, they ‘marked time’ with a quick marching movement on the spot. The leader paced up and down in front of the team, checking the attire and making sure that everyone was standing in the correct position... The stronger dancers usually stand at the outer ends of the line, with the weaker ones in the middle” (89.)

Intriguingly, this quote provides a lens to investigate the hierarchical nature of the gumboot dance tradition that seems to be rooted in an exchange of respect; as well as an image to imagine this process unfolding. In other words, Muller and Fraigon mirror aspects of Neale’s analysis of ‘masculinity as a spectacle,’ since he explores how certain gestures (like dance) can provide attributes of “being in control.” In this context, the act of being in control is based on the precise timing and measured movements of the dancers. For example, the quote above shows how the

male actors “paced up and down,” made sure everyone was standing in the “correct position,” and decidedly placed each dancer on either the “outside” or the “middle” (which hinged on the dancer's ranking and particular level of skill).

Muller and Fraigon seem to indirectly discuss Neale’s notion of “toughness” in relation to masculinity. From Neale’s point of view, I argue that the spectacle of toughness⁷ (and therefore, masculinity) can be identified based on the production and loudness of each sound. The sound in this case is generated by the impact created when the male actors forcefully stomp their feet together, and exert their body weight onto the ground; or according to Muller and Fraigon,

“Occasionally, [the male dancers] punctuated this movement by hitting their boots together at the ankles in a quick rhythmic pattern. They circled around the open space in the homestead, and then moved into a stationary straight-line formation, with the leader and musicians standing apart from the rest of the teams (88)

The passages that I’ve analyzed above demonstrate the specific ways in which masculinity is articulated in a particularly oppressive context— the South African gold mines. I’ve outlined different examples of the male subject and his historical (and complex) relationship to labor, protest, and varying forms of self-expression. In addition, I’ve noted how identifying visual aspects of masculinity in these literary examples show a construction and performance of gender expression by reflecting attributes of “toughness,” “hardness” and the act of “being in control”

⁷Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*.

(Neale). To add my own intervention in this analysis, consequently, I will study the male actor's choreographic methods. Arguably, through an in-depth investigation of choreographed movements by one contemporary male dancer of African descent (Lartey), my essay can spark potential political reflections on the social realm. These reflections can add to my extensive readings of masculinity as well as my ability to question the performative aspects of the African dancers' behaviors derived from rhythmic patterns and sequential movements. To be more precise, I'm primarily interested in exploring how these performative gestures of masculinity seem to be used as a "shield" as well as a "torch" that symbolizes knowledge, leadership, and freedom amongst the gumboot dance troupes.

Cultural Expression & Choreography in Dance and Performance Studies Discourse

It is necessary to explore modern choreography techniques in relation to traditional gumboot dancing and the sustainability of this dance composition. It is evident that Lartey's dance routines draw on a rich history of migrant Black African men working on South African gold mines. As a result, we must highlight the lasting impact of gumboot dance choreography. In doing so, we can explore how male dancers in the twenty-first century have continued to engage in forms of African masculinities through the choreographic nature of gumboot dancing. In later portions of the essay, I will argue that Lartey has sustained this dance tradition and the aspects of masculinity that are interwoven into it by mirroring— "toughness," "hardness," and the act of

“being in control.”⁸As previously mentioned, I will argue that the specific knowledge and skill that Lartey is imparting is rooted in the similar qualities of masculinity that traditional South African gumboot dancers constructed in the gold mines. Prior to this analysis, we must contextualize and then position Lartey’s function as an artist in a broader academic conversation that questions the role of cultural-expression and choreography in Dance and Performance studies discourse.



<https://www.luckyartey.com.au/about>

It is important to note that while studying a blend of dance that is both “traditional” and “contemporary,” choreography presents a unique challenge to our framework of understanding; this is because choreography is a predetermined sequence of steps and movements that are designed in a specified manner. Like traditional twentieth century gumboot dancers, modern male dancers performing gumboot dancing have found ways to engage in distinct sequential

⁸Steve Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on men and mainstream cinema." In *Screen* 24, no. 6 (1983): 2-16.

movements that are also “controlled,” and therefore, made “visible” (Neale). Lartey’s job as a choreographer and dancer is to interpret, ingest, and express emotional ideas through his performance.

In an interview with Sydney Opera House (2021), Lartey describes how his passion for dance and choreography traverse themes of social justice, identity, and movement. On his website,⁹ Lartey even goes so far as to write that he is inspired by the “exotification of non-western bodies.”¹⁰ He seems to represent this “exotification” by replicating African stories and rituals against a contemporary Australian backdrop. This essay does not examine the complexities that may arise when attempting to engage in African styles of dance in a Western context. However, it can shed light on the new creative and emotional spaces that may arise during this cross-cultural exchange. For instance, Lartey’s professional positioning as a dancer and choreographer and his cultural positioning as a Ghanaian-born man who lives in a Western context is reflective of this “new” space. It is necessary to understand the complexities of Lartey as a contemporary cultural artist. This is because he seemingly depicts conventional ideas about manliness through traditional practices rooted in gumboot dancing. Ultimately, I’m fascinated by the resilience of dance movements over time— both physically and socially. Physically due to the calculated movements in which Lartey mimics the gestures of traditional African dancers. And, socially because of these physical signifiers of masculinity are being passed down from one generation to the next. Arguably, these modern routines are often performed by dancers engaging in

⁹Lartey, Lucky. "Choreography." 2023, <https://www.luckylartey.com.au/gallery?lightbox=dataItem-kmijv96t1>

¹⁰Lartey, Lucky. "Choreography." 2023, <https://www.luckylartey.com.au/gallery?lightbox=dataItem-kmijv96t1>

synchronized movements, complex footwork, and creative choreography that are reflective of traditional practices in gumboot dancing.



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Through a comparative literary and visual analysis highlighting similarities between the “old” and the “new,” I aim to demonstrate that the intricate combination of stomping, clapping and vocalization that creates rhythms and patterns that show the “toughness,” “hardness,” and the act of “being in control” reflect literature detailing the historical and choreographic practices of gumboot dancing as well as the sustainable elements of masculinity shown in Lartey’s instructional video. Moreover, Lartey’s role as the choreographer in the Sydney Opera House’s presentation of *Infusion, No Movement, No Sound* is a key example of this process. In terms of the environmental factors that led to the creation of gumboot dancing, it is necessary to mention that the Sydney Opera House is often referred to as one of the world’s most famous and distinctive buildings. In the last 50 years, it has served as a multi-venue performing arts center

that honors a shared sense of belonging for all Australians. *Infusion, No Movement, No Sound*¹¹ is a visual representation of celebrating African, Indian and Australian rhythms with a global collective of contemporary and traditional dance and music. For these reasons, Lartey's instructional video inspired by his work as part of *Infusion, No Movement, No Sound* has shed light on the significance of cultural expression and choreography in dance and performance discourse related to the dismantling of power relations, the process of maintaining a sense of collectiveness, and ultimately, the chance to experience a freedom of self-expression even in a repressive environment.

Continued Practices of Masculinity and Gumboot Dancing



<https://www.luckyartey.com.au/about>

¹¹“Infusion, No Movement, No Sound Trailer - Infusion, No Movement, No Sound - Stream - Sydney Opera House.” Stream. Accessed April 7, 2023. <https://stream.sydneyoperahouse.com/packages/infusion-no-movement-no-sound/videos/infusion-no-movement-no-sound-trailer>.

In this portion of the essay, I will analyze the second space of my comparative literary analysis: the Sydney Opera House and the significance of Lartey's presentation of gumboot dancing. To emphasize intersections of race and resistance in the historical elements and influences linked to the genre of opera, I will lightly pull ideas from Andre's text, *Blackness in Opera (2014)*. It is crucial to note how blackness has been traditionally represented in theatrical spaces by studying 1) Issues surrounding characterization practices of Black people, 2) Interpretation of racialized roles by Blacks and whites, 3) Controversies over race in the theater and the use of black face, extensions of blackness and its connection to the grand opera, musical theater, film and now, dance. The extensive history of Opera being embedded into a larger framework of racialization and marginalization has led me to question the role of Lartey's performance in *Infusion, No Movement, No Sound*. Additionally, Lartey is not *only* performing at the opera house, but he is also choreographing each step, gesture, tone, and movement that the performance and overall narrative is depicting. Consequently, we must simultaneously keep in mind the contextual role of self-expression, explored in readings on African masculinities in South Africa; while strengthening our understanding of Lartey as a current Dancer, Choreographer & Visual Artist at the forefront of exploring intercultural dance practices as part of performance spaces in Sydney, Australia.

In the opening scene, Lartey visually introduces the choreographic elements of *Infusion, No Movement, No Sound*, (INFUSION Cast Talk..., 2021, 00:10-00:23). Lartey is shown on-stage, sitting on a three-dimensional block, music is playing as Lartey performs a steady production of rhythmic stamping and clapping. His movements are sharp as the sound in which his boots make are stark. The loudness of Lartey's stepping increases as the clip continues into a verbal

discussion on gumboot dancing as a traditional South African dance style. The camera cuts from a wide shot to a close-up of Lartey waving his arms, feet, and legs, with no hesitation. Before cutting to the next scene, Lartey quickly jumps from the three-dimensional block to a standing formation, he seemingly bows and the camera pauses (quickly). Lartey's depiction of toughness¹² seems to have been formed due to the repetitive production of sounds stemming from his stomping. Lartey's ability to move freely (and therefore, without hesitation) in response to the music implies a level of skill and expertise. In this case, Lartey is shown engaging with aspects of masculinity that are considered distinct and culturally significant when detailing the continuous nature of masculinity expressed through dance.

As the instructional video continues, the next scene *feels* particularly distinct due to the change of lighting from a bright shade to a calmer hue of purple. Arguably, this alternation of lighting allows the spectator to focus on the iterative quality of Lartey's movements, (INFUSION Cast Talk..., 2021, 00:44-1:04). The camera zooms-in to a close-up of Lartey's boots; he begins to tap the seemingly leathered embroidered fabric (of the boots) while the camera follows Lartey's monotonous movements. His gestures increase in speed as the recurring pattern of his tapping turns into a powerful demonstration of expertise and perhaps, habit. Lartey's repetitive movements convey a distinct sense of style, personality, or emotion. In doing so, his expression of continuity mirrors aspects of Neale's examination of masculinity as a spectacle and its connection to hardness.¹³ Based on the repetitive nature of Lartey's practice and routine, by solidifying his movements as a form of artistic and gendered expression, we can note the ways in

¹²Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on men and mainstream cinema."

¹³Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on men and mainstream cinema."

which his engagement with forms of African masculinity have led to freer styles of self-expression and control.

In the scene most reflective of an “instructional video,” a large, orange and white “title text” floats to the top of the screen that reads, “Gumboot Dancing, Try It At Home,” (INFUSION Cast Talk..., 2021, 01:35-3:24). Swiftly, the camera shows Lartey standing proudly by panning down his body from head-to-toe. Quickly, the scene cuts to a mid-shot of Lartey as he begins to explain some of the basic moves you can “hear” in gumboot dance. For example, Lartey looks directly at the camera and says to his audience, “We have stomp, we have slap, so the two together, you can go....” Lartey then deliberately slows down his pace as he demonstrates the command in which he holds over his movements. Simultaneously, Lartey’s physical gestures (of stomping, slapping, and clapping) suggests the pre-determined nature of his movements as well as the mastery in which he has developed his skill while showing (a broader audience) his choreographed routine that has stylistic flare and depicts Lartey’s extreme sense of discipline. For these reasons, Neale’s research on connections between the performance of masculinity and the act of being in control¹⁴ can answer the question— How have interpretations of the gumboot tradition by male dancers (in the twenty-first century) continued aspects of the gumboot dance tradition. As a result of Lartey’s precise timing and measured gestures, like the African miners (and dancers), they each show how the gumboot dance tradition mirrors a clear didactic purpose that is uniquely positioned to impart (and continue) a particular knowledge and skill set, specifically in spaces of subjugation. In closing, it is important to note that although there is no

¹⁴Neale, "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on men and mainstream cinema."

written or public information documenting Lartey experiencing aspects of subjugation, or the Sydney Opera House participating in institutional policies rooted in prejudicial practices; I have thoroughly studied readings confronting the role of Blackness in the Opera, and based on these findings, I have inferred that there are potentially substantial encounters that Lartey may experience as a man of African descent performing traditional African dance styles at the Sydney Opera House. According to the text, *Blackness in Opera* there are several ways in which Blackness has been traditionally racialized in theatrical spaces. As previously noted, these methods of marginalization and discrimination include: 1) Inaccurate characterization practices of Black people, 2) Harmful interpretations of racialized roles by Blacks and whites, 3) Controversies over race in the theater and the use of black face, extensions of Blackness and its connection to the grand Opera, musical theater, film and now, dance. In sum, through a historiographical analysis of African masculinities and an in-depth investigation on the performative aspects of Lartey's interpretation of gumboot dancing— I can study contemporary movement practices in relation to masculinity and its function in the social realm.

CONCLUSION

The conclusion returns to the main themes and arguments of the essay by reiterating intersections found when completing a literary study of readings on masculinities and a visual analysis of Lartey's choreographic movements that strengthen our overall understanding of the historical and social implications of the gumboot dance tradition. Additionally, I positioned gumboot dance as a tool to examine the production of masculinity in oppressive spaces like 1) The gold mines in South Africa (twentieth century) and 2) An Opera House in Sydney, Australia

(twenty-first century). As a result, I examined the similar environmental factors that led to the creation of gumboot dancing as a historical and modern form of self-expression. I have argued that a Ghanaian-born and Sydney-based choreography (Lartey) has sparked and continued an interesting juxtaposition of masculinity and self-expression that must be examined in a broader context. My research relies primarily on scholarly work in Theatre and Performance Studies, History, and Gender Studies. To move a methodical discussion on masculinity and interpretive perceptions of manhood forward, I have heavily leaned on Neale's text, "Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on men and mainstream cinema" to analyze physical gestures and choreographed movements suggesting masculinity. Moreover, due to Hall's extensive examination exploring the process of uncovering societal codes in his text, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practice*, I have also analyzed the regimented process of exhibiting masculinity through the gumboot dance style. For example, I examine Neale's themes of masculinity in the textual presentation (or written description) of toughness, hardness, and the act of being in control. In sum, studying the ways in which African male dancers have developed their own systems of self-expression amidst oppressive circumstances and through the use of choreographic techniques will create more space to imagine novel forms of visibility, a reclaiming of control, and liberation, specifically for Afro-descended people.



<https://www.luckyartey.com.au/about>

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