

Let the Dance Speak to You: How Dance Is a Cultural Artifact of Communication and Connection that Endures

LaToya Carter

Feel the rhythm. African Student Association dancer LaToya Carter explores one of her biggest passions: African dance. Considering how dance is an interactive circle of give and take between performers and audiences, Carter connects dance to cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). She demonstrates how by zooming in on the processes and practices of dance as interactive text, we will find that dance, like writing, is a vital cultural artifact, a tool that we respond to and make specific meaning of, which is passed down and adapted for different purposes in various social contexts.

Circle of Give and Take

We were performing on stage in front of our peers. The sun was beaming down upon us; outside performances are not always my first choice, but we were having fun! My heart was pounding with force, but my mind and body were free. As I looked to the right of me, I saw my dancemates' faces, and they, too, looked free. We were in total rhythm . . . connecting. Our bodies flowing from left to right as we transitioned to new positions on stage, we knew we were making everyone feel it. The communication we were having on stage, we did not want to end. No, we were not actually talking amongst ourselves, but there was communication between us as well as between us and the audience. Although we were not literally *talking* to the audience, from our facial expressions and costumes to the movements of our arms and legs all the way down to the stomping of our feet, our dancing was doing all the talking for us. And, the audience was speaking right back to us by using their facial expressions, clapping their hands, and tapping their feet. It was body and music language being reciprocated—nonverbal communications—and it was powerful. As a dancer for the African Student Association (ASA), what is special about dance to me is just how social and interactive it truly is.

In “Just CHATting,” Joyce Walker talks about CHAT, which stands for cultural-historical activity theory, and the different CHAT terms that help us research writing, such as “socialization.” Walker explains **socialization** as being the interaction between audiences, producers, and their creations (76). When reading, even though we might not realize it, we are interacting with the words on the page as well as with the author who wrote it. We look at the writing piece and try to understand not only what the author is trying to say to us but also how and why they are doing so in that particular context. For example, as a student, do you remember those questions at the end of our reading assignments, such as, “What did the author want you to take away from the story?” I do. And although those types of school questions represent the interaction between teachers and students, usually associated with performing for a grade, those questions also encourage students to interact with what they are reading and the authors who wrote it. As we read, we are taking up lots of different information and trying to make sense of it for ourselves.

In other words, we interpret the piece of writing based on our own understandings, motivations, and prior experiences, and this is mixed with what the author is attempting to communicate. At any time during our reading, our connections with the writer and their creation can often lead to a response—a response that is similar to answering end-of-story questions as we did in class, but also one that means something to us beyond the classroom and assignments. Have you ever read a good book, and when you were finished, you just had to tell someone about it? You might say, “That was good!” Maybe you read a book or perhaps watched a movie (remember, movies are writing forms too), and you did not like it at all. You might say, “That was terrible. I can’t get those two hours of my life back.” In short, we read, interpret, and connect to *what we think* is being conveyed, and we respond in some way to that meaning. And this reaction is not a linear process. We can do these things during all parts of the interaction; it’s *a circle of give and take*, which is what makes it a social practice. Dance proves that communication is not always textual.

For instance, the ASA Dance Team performs a traditional, passed-down routine, which is very much a narrative, called “Warrior Princess.” In this dance, we will start off as a nurturing woman who is at home taking care of a baby. The audience will pick up on the hints, our body language, when we do different moves, such as rocking a baby in our arms. Later in the dance, we will transition into the persona of a warrior where we leave our child at home and go off to fight. The audience will read our nonverbal communication when we bend over and extend our cradled arms out, as if we are putting our baby gently down, and then we will run and thrust our arm out and back, just like we have a bow and arrow and are shooting at something. Our facial

expressions will go from gentle, sweet, and calm to determined, daring, and fierce. In the end, we hope that the audience interprets it—reads it—in a way that connects to the narrative story we just performed.

These very ideas and theories can be applied to dancing as well. It's one thing to say dance is a form of communication, but if we zoom in on processes and practices of dance as text, we will find that, like writing, dance is a vital cultural artifact, a cultural tool that we respond to and interact with, which is passed down from generation to generation and adapted for different audiences, reasons, and purposes in various social contexts. In *Cultural Psychology: A Once and Future Discipline*, Michael Cole defines an "artifact" as any tool that is "an aspect of the material world that has been modified over the history of its incorporation into goal-directed human action" (117). Dance is interactive and social as a "goal-directed human action" that helps us connect, evolve, and even survive, so dance is a cultural artifact that endures, which helps us endure. Let's look at three distinct dances—soukous, azonto, and eskista—and how each is situated in diverse social context and practices "as goal-directed human action," making dancers and audiences feel connected to our creations and audiences of the past, present, and future (117).

Stomp It Out: Background on Each Dance

The soukous is not one specific dance but actually many different types of traditional dances, which are performed by Congolese people in Congo. Soukous not only refers to dance but music too. Dated back to the mid-1990's, soukous can be known as a combination between both Cuban and African music. The content of the dances consists of mainly moving your hips and bottom, but leg and arm movements are involved too. This dance can be performed to any genre of African music. Some soukous dances are more intense than others. Some people use these dances for rituals or to bring healing to people in need.

The azonto dance originated in Ghana in the early 1990s. It is one of the simplest dances to learn. It has become very popular mainly because it can be performed anywhere, whether you are at a party, wedding, even a funeral, where dancing is another way for people to honor a loved one who has passed away. Traditionally, you would find men performing such dances with the casket on their shoulder. The dance consists of a one-two step in which you move your hand up and down. Many dance teams have taken azonto into their choreography. This dance is usually performed to more upbeat songs, but you can perform azonto to any genre of music.

The eskista dance originated in Ethiopia and is one of the oldest traditional dances still performed today. The eskista is a simple dance that consists of moving your shoulders back and forth and is performed by both men and women. While the azonto is performed with modern upbeat music, in my years of seeing the eskista, I have never seen it performed with upbeat music, but it is rather performed with traditional Ethiopian music. Traditional Ethiopian music can be played with traditional instruments, such as the *kebero*, which is like a drum, a *washint*, which is a flute, and a *kirar*, which is a guitar, as well as many other traditional instruments. (As an interesting side note that I don't have time to discuss here fully: Eskista sets the precedent of many other dances, including the "Harlem shake," which brought about a debate on whether or not black Americans were appropriating African culture.)

Feel the Rhythm! How Dance Is Communication.

Soukous

The soukous communicates in many different ways with the intended audience. The dance is based on the religion of the Congolese people. According to Arenastage.org, "Congolese traditional dance is rooted in ritual. Usually done in recognition of the spirit world, each dance has its own rhythm, movements, physical motif or inspiration, and song." Many people will sit around and listen to the dancers and be taken by the spirit. The context of the dance can be altered depending on the person who performs it and how they perform it.

Communication plays a huge role when it comes to African traditional dances. Interpretation in dance is especially important, and both audience and dancers can have different interpretations. Dancers think about things such as: how much did the audience interpret? did the audience understand what was going on? and did I convey the right interpretation? As a dancer, you never want to give the wrong interpretation because these are passed-down body narratives and body texts with specific meanings. So, not interpreting the dance correctly can leave the audience a bit confused or even upset, depending on what they have interpreted from your performance.

This is also why costume is so important in dance (Figure 1). Many African dance teams do not realize that they should not paint their face with dots, at least not without carefully researching the potential meanings of these markings. Face paint started in different villages all throughout Africa, and each pattern can portray a different meaning. If a dance team was performing with a pattern on their face that someone from a village may wear when they

are about to sacrifice something, a person from that village may be confused when you do not conclude the performance with a move that elicits some kind of body language sacrifice. Of course, that is just an example, but it is important for dance teams to think about how an audience may interpret their performance before performing.

In “Just CHATting,” Joyce Walker talks about **production**, which is all the resources you use in creating your text. In the context of dance, “production” is all the resources you use within the dance and what the goal of the dance may be (74–75). Whether it is costume, face paint, or music, all three are used to create this dance for a specific purpose or feeling. As a student you can think about this when creating a PowerPoint for class: what is your production? What do you use to create your text? And for what purpose? As a dancer, it is important to consider your production and purpose before performing because different cultures and different peoples can read things much differently than you may think.

For example, I have seen the flamenco dance performed by dancers from the Spanish culture. I loved the performance, but I did not know the dance had meaning and purpose behind it. I cannot connect to the dance like someone from that culture without researching more about it. This does not mean that someone from another culture cannot understand at all, it just means someone from that specific culture watching their traditional dances would be able to interpret it with more of an immediate understanding than perhaps someone from another culture.

As an ASA dancer, I try to spread different cultures of dance to people on campus, which really shows just how important this cultural artifact is to me. And that’s what ASA is all about: spreading the African culture to students here on campus to pass it down. Some people look for different meaning within the dance. For example, the soukous can communicate many different things, such as spirituality, warmth, healing, and protection. If one needs healing, they would go and see the soukous dance so that they can receive that healing. A simple dance can bring these renewing feelings to a whole village.

One may ask how I receive this sort of communication from a dance. Going through tough situations in life helps you connect to traditional dances. To see dancers on stage convey exactly how you feel can bring such a relief to your life and make you feel like you’re not alone. When I perform traditional dances, I take them seriously because you never know whose heart you may touch. Although I am the one doing the “goal-directed” actions, I still receive some of the benefits from it, such as freedom and connection. When I am on stage, I feel like every problem I have just goes away and for that moment it’s just me and dance, and I absolutely love that moment!



Figure 1: Costumes are just as important as the dance itself. The costume is a form of communication and can tell you where the person is from and what type of dancing you are about to receive. For example, if someone is wearing face paint, often times, they are from a village. Certain costumes and face paint give off a certain religion or background. You can go to this website for more information <https://afrodanciac.wordpress.com/dance-style/>.

As a dancer, my job is to help the audience understand each movement whether it's through my facial expression or my body movements. The audience also communicates back whether they know it or not. Clapping, dancing along, even a simple tapping of your feet can show communication. Have you ever been somewhere and you heard a tune for the first time; at first you're just listening to it, but then later you notice you began to tap your foot, rock side to side, and even start humming it to yourself? Well that's exactly what the audience is doing. First you're just watching the performance, and then you began to clap, smile, and dance a little in your chair hoping nobody noticed. That's you becoming involved and connecting with the performers. You are showing through your body language that you are enjoying it. Many audiences don't know that performers also feed off your energy. When you are excited, that makes us even more excited, and we give you all the energy we have left. Ideally, it is the audience's job to understand what the dancers are doing on stage; of course it can be sort of challenging, especially if you are from a different culture. On the other hand, it is the dancers' job to make communication as clear as possible and facial expressions help a lot. A dancer's face can tell you whether it is a sad, happy, or serious moment at any part of the dance. As mentioned before, I was a warrior princess who had to leave my child behind to go fight in one of my performances, so I made sure my face showed determination and anger and that I was ready to go out and fight.

Azonto

“Dancing, as an art form, has always been expressive. And the West African dance craze ‘azonto’ certainly communicates a message although in a more direct way than other dances do” (Chigozie). The azonto dance (see Figure 2) can communicate different activities, hobbies, and actually speak to other people; it is as if you are doing sign language through dance. For example, one can pretend that they are sweeping the floor by moving their legs and arms in a certain way. Better yet, one can flirt with someone while doing the azonto by doing different motions like signaling them to come over, or to text them by moving their fingers in a way that you would do if you were texting someone. Many may be in disbelief that one simple dance can communicate good things, bad things, and inappropriate things. It’s all in the performer and what are they trying to communicate.



Figure 2: Go to this website to see these dancers azonto. In this scene of the video the dancers were pretending that they were washing themselves. Also see how you interpret this dance vs. how your friend may interpret it, remember everyone doesn't receive the same message.

https://vk.com/video170402306_1626292215?list=a14c42ccd7c787f394

This link will show the azonto being performed at a funeral.

www.google.com/?gws_rd=ssl#q=azonto+performed+at+funeral

The communicator/dancer has to be careful at times when doing such dances that it does not offend someone. For instance, if a guy is flirting with a girl through the azonto dance in a sexual way, the girl may interpret the guy as being disrespectful, which may offend her. On the other hand, another girl can interpret the dance as a compliment. It is the same exact move, but it gives off two very different interpretations. That's why it is so important to outline the dance to make sure it is appropriate. The relationship between dancer and audience is closer than you think.

This situation of dance refers to “representation.” In CHAT, **representation** is how one plans things out. As a dancer you need to think, plan, and practice before performing. Just as if you were planning on how you are going to present something to a classroom, both situations have an audience. The ASA dance team had the opportunity to teach a young audience here in Normal different African dances, and azonto was one of them. The kids had a blast; one girl even asked if she could join our dance team. Although the kids did not know that they were communicating through this dance, I was able to, as their audience, interpret their dance movements. I was able to receive happiness and joy through their dance and it was awesome. The azonto has become very famous and is being performed nationwide, which means this dance has been passed down and translated in many ways that one can only imagine.

Eskista

Many Ethiopians may know the eskista (See Figure 3) as “the dancing shoulders” because that is exactly what it is. So the next question may be: How can “dancing shoulders” communicate to an audience? According to cultural activist Martina Petkova, “significant movements are having a great impact on the Ethiopian indigenous society as a whole. Some of the ideas and themes in this dance are actually inspired from the relations between the genders, work life, and religion.” People take their life struggles or happiness, put it into the dance, and translate these situations and feelings into body language to communicate with the audience. The eskista can communicate joy, pain, and happiness; it may be one of my favorite dances to watch as it is so beautiful. This dance is usually performed at weddings and other social gatherings. The eskista is usually only performed at happy festivities, as opposed to the azonto, which I explained earlier can be performed at funerals. This brings up an important point: knowing where and who to perform a certain dance to is important. This refers to the CHAT term **distribution**, as in who is receiving the text and where (Walker 75). The ASA dance team was once invited to perform at a church event. We knew that certain dances like the “mapouka,” a dance which focuses on your waist and bottom, would not be appropriate for the event, while the eskista fits that context perfectly.

Overall, the eskista is a fun dance! Not only to watch but to perform as well. The ASA dance team incorporates many different dances from all over the continent of Africa. The eskista has one of my favorite dance moves. I literally have the biggest smile on my face every time I perform it. It’s such a happy dance that it even brings joy to the audience as you can see them smiling as well. When the ASA dance team performed this routine, you could see people in the crowd trying to do the dance too. To see the audience’s



Figure 3: In this video you can watch Ethiopian girls perform the famous eskista dance in their traditional Kemis dress.

http://www.diretube.com/ethiopian-talent/watch-ethiopian-girls-dancing-eskista-enjoy-video_8f1abd6a0.html

facial expressions that night was priceless! That dance brought so much joy to the room that everyone, by the end of the dance, was on their feet. They most likely didn't understand the Ethiopian music. I don't even understand the music because it is sung in a different language, but the dance itself was able to communicate to everyone in the room.

I interviewed my friend, Tehaynish Demilew, who is Ethiopian and in her junior year here at Illinois State University and is very familiar with eskista. Tehaynish learned how to do the dance from the Ethiopian Community Association, an after-school program, when she was six years old. This is an example of how dance is an artifact that is taken up, learned by individuals, and passed down through generations, so much so that they have after school programs to teach such dances. Sometimes they dance the eskista for fundraisers to raise money and cultural awareness. Tehaynish believes that the eskista communicates cultural enrichment and celebrates diversity and how to really enjoy each other's presence. "Eskista is not a competition," Tehaynish says, "it's a beautiful dance that can bring you joy."

Dance Lives On! Create and Connect. Evolve and Endure.

Joyce Walker explains how CHAT is "an important acronym for our writing program, because it refers to a set of theories about rhetorical activity (how people act and communicate in the world—specifically through the production of all kinds of texts), that help us look at the how/why/what

of writing practices” (71–72). Considering dance in light of this theory, we can see that it is an important form of communication, a textual cultural artifact without actual words that is passed down through generations. Dance is interactive and social as a “goal-directed human action” that helps us to not only create and connect, but also to evolve and endure.

In fact, African dance was the most effective way to communicate during slavery. Due to language barriers, dance was a cultural artifact used to create, communicate, and survive. Separated from families and friends, and often sold across oceans into communities in which many did not speak the same language or dialect, slaves were both unable and also forbidden to communicate verbally with one another. So they created and passed down their own cultural texts in different ways. Included in these were dance narratives—which integrated music, song, motions, rhythm and body language—used to connect, empathize, share feelings and frustrations, and relay vital information to one another.

In “Legacies of Slavery,” Dr. Alan Rice writes about how dance and music were cultural tools and that African “dances had particular meanings and could convey specific ideas.” Interestingly, Rice reveals how the “limbo” dance, where you try to bend down as low as possible to pass an object, was created by slaves and actually “spoke directly of the limited space in the slaving ships and the African ability to escape it.” Another dance, called the “cakewalk” was created by American slaves in the south. Rice writes how, “This dance poked fun at the plantation owners. In this way, African resistance to slavery was expressed culturally.” Without a doubt, dance was a means to create and connect as well as to evolve and endure.

Ultimately, as seen with many African dances, story is important and proves how narratives are not just textual and can include body language and passing down of vital information and energy. Considering these different types of dances, African dancers want audiences to receive a message, share emotions, and experience the interactive circle of give and take during their performance. All of this connects right back to socialization (and other CHAT terms) because this is “writing” and “reading” without using words. It also shows how alternative forms of communication are cultural artifacts with deep human meanings and purposes.

I asked my dance friend Tehaynish if she could picture a world without dance, and she said, “No!” I couldn’t picture the world without dance either. What would we do when our favorite song comes on? If I was to live in a world without dance, I would be living a life knowing something was always missing. Dance is a part of life and, in my view, living on. The environment,

the audience's energy, and the connection to other people is what makes it so special (Figure 4). Being on stage and hearing my friends and family cheer me on is what keeps me motivated. I feel alive! It is fun to hear the shouts from our friends, "You go girl," "Let's Go ASA," "Yasssss Girl," or "Ooh, they're killing it!" Both dancers and audiences affect one another. We feed off each other's energy and create a story that speaks and moves . . . and speaks and moves on . . .



Figure 4: 2014-2015 ASA (African Student Association) Dance Team. In this one single picture we have women from all different cultural backgrounds. We have women that are Congolese, Nigerian, Jamaican, Ghanaian, Sudanese, and African American. No matter where each person is from, as a dance team we are opened to all different types of dances across the African continent.

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