

From Kitchen Mechanics to “Jubilant Spirits of Freedom”: Black, Working-Class Women Dancing the Lindy Hop

by

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Abstract: This essay examines the ways in which the Lindy Hop provided a means of escape, freedom, and rebellion for Black, working-class women during the swing era. Rudolph Fisher's "The Lindy Hop," Ann Petry's "In Darkness and Confusion," Ann Petry's *The Street*, and Debbie Allen's *Stompin' at the Savoy* coincide with the social history of the era and prove that the Lindy Hop and jazz culture held a great deal of social power for Black, working-class women. Because of expectations for the Black female body, Black, working-class women who danced the Lindy Hop were not just rebelling against their White employers, but also the Black bourgeoisie and the older generation; in this way, these women were reclaiming their bodies for pleasure rather than wage labor.

Keywords: Lindy Hop; Black women; Jazz culture; Literature.

“Through sound and movement—through their bodies—musicians, dancers, and athletes enact the formative ideas of the age. Cultural production is political. And intellectual.”

- Gena Caponi-Tabery in *Jump for Joy: Jazz, Basketball, and Black Culture in 1930s America*

In “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Langston Hughes famously wrote, “jazz to me is one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America; the eternal tom-tom beating in the Negro soul—the tom-tom of revolt against weariness in a white world, a world of subway trains, and work, work, work; the tom-tom of joy and laughter, and pain swallowed in a smile” (43). In this passage, Hughes points out an important function of jazz for the Black working-class during the first half of the 20th century: resistance to the White-dominated world of labor. Similarly, J.A. Rogers in “Jazz at Home” claims that “[j]azz isn’t music merely[;] it is a spirit that can express itself in almost anything. The true spirit of jazz is a joyous revolt from convention, custom, authority, boredom, even sorrow—from everything that would confine the soul of man and hinder its riding free on the air” (492). Both of these writers emphasize the use of jazz not only as a means of revolt but also as a source of freedom through that revolt. Hughes points out the need for revolt against work, which he links with the White world; after long hours of hard labor, many Black working-class people at this time agreed and took solace in jazz dance. These young, Black men and women included not only “kitchen mechanics,” a slang term for maids and cooks, but also waiters, porters, doormen, secretaries, hairdressers, stevedores, carpenters, and janitors. Many of these Black, working-class youth in the late 1920s through 1940s spent their leisure time at the Savoy Ballroom, visiting nightclubs to listen to jazz, drinking, and/or engaging in sensual pleasures. These activities were not simply fun; they were a means of escape: a way to freedom from their lives as menial wage workers. At the most basic level, jazz culture¹ allowed the workers to reclaim their bodies as a source of personal enjoyment rather than a mechanism of labor. Furthermore, it provided some of these Black youth a chance for achievement as well as a means to resist the dominant culture, both the White and Black bourgeois culture that emphasized the importance of work and respectability.

Previous scholarship on this time period has focused primarily on jazz music, overlooking the importance of dance research. In his introduction to *Representing Jazz*, Krin Gabbard claims that until this collection, those critics writing about jazz ignored the “extramusical aspects of jazz” such as dance, styles of language, and social relations (3). Likewise, Brenda Dixon Gottschild asserts that in looking at performance history, “the pivotal role of dance has been trivialized while other performing arts (music, in particular) have been the focus of print documentation and scholarly attention” (10). At the same time, Jacqui Malone points out the importance of dance, particularly African American dance, as a means of liberation and rebellion. She claims that dance “helps drive the blues away and provides rich opportunities to symbolically challenge societal hierarchies by offering powers and freedoms that are impossible in ordinary life” (1). In response to the neglect of dance in jazz studies and performance studies, this essay examines the ways in which Black working-class women participated in jazz culture and the Lindy Hop. Drawing on the cultural history of the Lindy Hop, I argue that Black, working-class women not only found solace and escape in dancing but also a means to resist expectations for their race, class, and gender. In examining fictional accounts in literature and film, I show that these representations of the Lindy Hop and jazz culture mirror real-life experiences.

At the very least, jazz, including music and dance, was a way to escape the daily grind that Black, working-class youth experienced. Steve Chibnall claims that the “feverish dancing of the Savoy’s stompers released the daily tensions of life in the pressuriz[ed] world of Harlem’s hipster clubs” (59). Likewise, Robin D. G. Kelley explains that “[f]or many working-class men and women who daily endured back-breaking wage work, low income, long hours, and pervasive racism, these urban dance halls were places to recuperate, to take back their bodies” (142). In an effort to forget their daily routines, “black working people of both sexes shook and twisted their already overworked bodies, drank, talked, engaged in sexual play, and—in spite of occasional fights—reinforced their sense of community” (142). Louis A. Erenberg believes that “moving the audiences to ecstatic release” was the “most important function” that the bands who played jazz music could perform (111). In fact, dancing as a form of escape was so popular amongst domestics that the Savoy deemed Thursday nights “Kitchen Mechanics’ Night.” The Savoy allowed women to enter for free on Thursdays, and most of the frequenters were maids and cooks who had the night off, but had to work all weekend (Watson 139; Engelbrecht 5). Frankie Manning, a famous Lindy Hopper, recounts that Kitchen Mechanics’ Night was “for folks who were working all week, so you got a lot of one-nighters. Most of them were women, domestics who got Thursdays off, and they were ready to party” (66). With only one night off from their consuming jobs, these Black women needed a chance to relax and have fun. In light of their looming weekend of work, they needed this form of escape.

Perhaps most significantly, jazz culture also gave Black, working-class women a means to resist the dominant culture. Because of the concern over young, Black women’s sexuality, Black, working-class women were in a particular bind, and the expectations for their bodies were carefully prescribed. The link between promiscuity and dancing caused parents, employers, and community leaders to worry about the young, Black women migrating from the South. As Hazel Carby says, “[t]he movement of black women between rural and urban areas and between southern and northern cities generated a series of moral panics. One serious consequence was that the behavior of black female migrants was characterized as sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous” (739). Stereotypes of Black women as naturally promiscuous and overly sexual increased the fears that young, Black women, now living away from home and given the chance to explore new venues for their leisure time, would become unruly and wild. Carby explains that numerous fears existed in the stories of migrating young, Black women: “fears of a rampant and uncontrolled female sexuality; fears of miscegenation; and fears of the assertion of an independent black female desire that has been unleashed through migration” (745-46). These fears were shared by parents, the Black bourgeoisie, and Whites alike. Thus, “[w]ith the increasing popularity of movies, dance halls, and amusement parks, community members and relatives became more concerned about how and with whom their young women spent their leisure time. Reformers and the police also attempted to regulate working-class women’s social lives and especially their sexuality” (Hicks 419). Black, working-class women’s sexuality was considered threatening and their assertion of independence and choice in entertainment served as another means of rebellion against expectations for their bodies.

For the older generations and the Black bourgeoisie, Black, working-class women's dancing opposed the values of respectability and hard work. According to Hazel V. Carby:

[t]he need to police and discipline the behavior of black women in cities, however, was not only a premise of white agencies and institutions but also a perception of black institutions and organizations, and the black middle class. The moral panic about the urban presence of apparently uncontrolled black women was symptomatic of and referenced aspects of the more general crises of social displacement and dislocation that were caused by migration. (741)

Wanting to separate themselves from the stereotypes of African Americans as lazy and disreputable, the Black bourgeoisie rejected activities that did not coincide with a strong work ethic. Rather than engage in forms of entertainment like dancing, the Black bourgeoisie promoted respectable leisure time activities like those sponsored by the church. Thus, the surge of young, Black women migrating to the city incited panic as these women were not only alone and unchaperoned, but also interested in exploring all the entertainment options offered in the city. Cheryl D. Hicks believes “[s]uch anxiety about how young women seemed captured by secular music and behavior epitomized black leaders’ and family members’ authentic concerns about individual women’s welfare in addition to their belief that respectability was a viable strategy for racial advancement and a stable home life” (432). The older generations and the Black bourgeoisie viewed dance halls as temptation for migrating young, Black women: “they agreed that the urban trappings of ‘silk and electric lights’ and other ‘evil influences’ such as dance halls and saloons caused young women to go astray” (Hicks 431). In this way, dance halls and the Black women who frequented them became the enemy to racial advancement since dance halls were considered both morally reprehensible as well as a distraction from reputable work.

In addition, dance halls were also considered the enemy of racial advancement because they distracted people from work, and the Black bourgeoisie feared that the entire race would be labeled lazy if the working-class did not display a strong work ethic. In their minds, the appeal of dancing might tempt the Black working-class to leave work early, not show up to work at all, or even refuse certain duties. For instance, domestics who only have Thursday nights off might refuse to stay and work that night when asked by their mistresses to do extra tasks. Furthermore, the Black bourgeoisie feared that dancing long and hard into the night might be so tiring that the Black, working-class women would not be able to properly perform their duties the following day. According to Tera Hunter, “[t]he black bourgeoisie lamented the shame and disgrace that befell the entire race when workers failed to live up to the highest expectations of dutiful service” (179).

While the Black bourgeoisie feared the implications of dance interfering with wage work, the Black working-class celebrated the freedom it provided: “[t]he masses of black women and men embraced dancing because it met needs not completely satisfied by the church or other institutions; it countered the debilitating impact of wage labor” (Hunter 178). In this way, the dancers were rejecting the expectations of the middle-class and its values, and, instead, constructed their own working-class set of values—privileging leisure time over work time—and reclaiming their bodies for their own use. As Hunter explains,

[b]oth sides understood that dancing interfered with wage work, though clearly from antithetical perspectives. The elite saw dancing as a hindrance to the creation of a chaste, disciplined, submissive, and hard-driving labor force—the hallmarks of the Protestant work ethic. Workers saw it as a respite from the deadening sensation of long hours of poorly compensated labor—critical to the task of claiming one’s life as one’s own. (180)

However, dancing was not a complete refusal of work, but rather a specific refusal of wage labor that was repetitive, non-engaging, and poorly paid. According to Hunter, “[t]hough dancing was seen as interfering with wage labor, the connotation of ‘work’ in black culture had multiple meanings. Work not only meant physical labor, it also meant dancing....The ethics of drive, achievement, and perseverance took on a different meaning when removed from the context of wage relations” (181). While the Black bourgeoisie feared that the working-class’s privileging of leisure time would reinforce the stereotype of their race being lazy, the Black, working-class viewed dancing as a form of work, just not wage labor. Dancing provided them with a skill that could be practiced, modified through creative improvisation, and perfected which, in turn, was a more rewarding achievement than the repetitive work that was performed as a domestic worker.

Moreover, this alternative definition of work provided Black women, in particular, with a new understanding of their gender performance. In a society which valued femininity in only one particular definition, that of White womanhood, Black, working-class women sought ways to create their own understandings of femininity. Tera Hunter claims that “[t]he value placed on dancing as hard work resonated in particular with African-American women workers in a society in which the highest valorization of womanhood was largely defined by non-work. The ideal woman did not engage in wage work, and the ideal woman’s vocation in the home was not considered work” (181). Dancing provided a means in which “black women could reconstruct notions of womanhood” (Hunter 181). To illustrate her point, Hunter provides the example of a woman in the community named Sue: “Sue worked hard, like a man, during the day, but she shed her industrial pants and worked hard as a woman at night, as she danced in a setting in which femininity was appreciated for its compatibility with work of several different orders” (181-82). Instead of accepting the definition of White femininity, Black women decided that a woman could work both during the day and at night.

Shedding the demoralizing maid uniform she wore during the day, she could dance in beautiful, feminine dresses and celebrate her body and sexuality. In fact, “in dance halls, black beauty could be highlighted and celebrated” (Hunter 183). Black dance, particularly the Lindy Hop, privileges the movement of the hips and buttocks; therefore, Black women’s bodies were celebrated as they perfected these moves. With an alternative definition of femininity and beauty, the Black, working-class women who frequented dance halls found places of escape from the degradation they felt in the White world.

For Whites, Black, working-class women’s dancing rejected the idea that the Black body was to be used only for labor in White homes. White mistresses saw the Black, working-class woman as her property, and any exertion outside of the White home was work robbed from her. In this way, “[w]hite employers opposed the violation of what they considered their rightful claim to restrict Black women’s exertions to manual work” (Hunter 179). These White employers feared that if a Black woman danced all night, she would not have the energy to complete her duties inside the White home the following day. Additionally, the linking of dancing with sex incited fear: “[i]t was believed that dancing encouraged sexual promiscuity among black women, who would then taint the white households through their illicit activity” (Hunter 179). Similarly, “[w]hite employers also objected to dancing by black domestic workers because they feared that the dance halls bred social contagions that would infect their homes” (Hunter 179). Thus, like the Black bourgeoisie who feared the sexual connotations of Black dance might lead to sexual promiscuity amongst Black women, the White employers also worried that Black women might be doing more than just dancing. Of course, White mistresses who believed that their maids were interested in seducing all White men were particularly concerned with the possibility that these women would sleep with the mistresses’ husbands. Despite all the fears of the contamination of the White household, “[t]he mere sight of African Americans, especially domestic workers, deriving pleasure and expressing symbolic liberation in dance halls by posing alternative meanings of bodily exertion seemed threatening to employers” (Hunter 185). If domestic workers could reclaim their bodies for themselves in dance halls, then they might also begin to reject the entire notion that they should work in White households altogether. Black, working-class women were, then, defiantly dancing. They were not only rejecting the ideas of their own race, in terms of what was deemed appropriate and necessary for their time and sexuality, but also rejecting the ideas of White culture that believed it owned the Black body.

This resistance to dancing and the culture surrounding it created a space where Black, working-class women could construct their own ideas about race, class, and gender. Constantly at battle with their parents, employers, the Black bourgeoisie, and mainstream White culture, these women were responsible for deciding for themselves what constituted femininity, who owned the Black body, and how a working-class youth’s leisure time should be spent.

Even though they may not have been concerned with the political implications surrounding their desires to dance, these women, nonetheless, rejected the expectations that Whites and the Black bourgeoisie had for them consequently forming a cultural identity that fit their needs and desires. Tired of working long hours in White households; of being told that they should be chaste and religious; of being inappropriately judged based on their gender and skin color; these women put on their dancing shoes and reclaimed their bodies—even if only for one night a week.

Therefore, jazz music and dance and the culture that surrounds them can be described as a source of freedom and resistance for Black, working-class women in the early part of the 20th century. Not surprisingly, some of the writers of this time period also portrayed jazz culture in this light. While I do draw from some historical accounts of Black, working-class women of this time period, fiction provides a unique narrative of the experiences of these women. Because this was a time when Black, working-class women's experiences were not valued, only a very limited record of their lives, particularly their limited leisure time, exists. Black writers were familiar with the cultural practices of African Americans, so their works can provide a glimpse into the leisure time activities enjoyed during this time. More specifically, Ann Petry, a former journalist, was intimately aware of the lives of the Black working-class since she researched and wrote about them for many of her newspaper pieces. Therefore, fiction helps us fill in the blanks and tell the story of women who would otherwise not have a voice. For this reason, I examine how Rudolph Fisher's "The Lindy Hop," Ann Petry's "In Darkness and Confusion," Ann Petry's *The Street*, and Debbie Allen's made-for-television film *Stompin' at the Savoy* illustrate how dancing and jazz culture provided a means of escape and rebellion for Black working-class female characters. Through dancing, listening to jazz, and going to nightclubs, these characters are able to reclaim their bodies for the use of pleasure rather than for the use of work set forth by the Black and White middle-class. In discussing the use of music in African American literary texts, Saadi A. Simawe's introduction to *Black Orpheus* deems this music "orphanic music because the writers discussed attribute subversive, unsettling, antiestablishment, and ultimately liberating and transforming power to the music and the musicians they portray" (xxiii). Simawe believes that "genuine freedom...cannot be expressed in language. Rather, it is music, dance, and singing that provide the adequate expression for the deepest and most complex spiritual and emotional realities" (xxiii). The characters in "The Lindy Hop," "In Darkness and Confusion," *The Street*, and *Stompin' at the Savoy*, whether consciously or unconsciously, illustrate Simawe's position, thus experiencing their freedom through jazz music and dance.

The short story "The Lindy Hop" by Rudolph Fisher, unpublished but probably written between 1932 and 1933, illustrates resistive qualities of the Lindy Hop for the young, Black working-class protagonist, Tillie. Though she is not attempting to make a bold political statement through her dancing, she is resisting the older generation's negative viewpoint, as portrayed by her grandmother, of jazz culture. "The Lindy Hop" tells the story of a young girl, Tillie, who defies her grandmother to participate in a Lindy Hop contest at the Arcadia ballroom. Grammie fears that Tillie will win the Lindy Hop contest and become a dance-hall hostess, an occupation that Grammie claims killed Tillie's mother.

Grammie wishes that Tillie would spend her time with Pep, one of her boarders, “out ‘mongst some quality folks” (288). However, Tillie responds to her grandmother’s request with “Pepper don’ dance” making it very clear that her main, if not only, interest is in Lindy Hop (288). Although her enthusiasm for dance, as well as the opening scene in which she happily dances around the kitchen, are indicators of her love for the dance, Tillie appears to see Lindy Hop as her way out of her dead-end job. Tillie tries to explain to her grandmother that she has a good chance of winning the Lindy Hop contest which will result in an offer for a job as a hostess at the ballroom. She claims, “I got a chance to make twenty bucks a week” (288). In addition, she reasons, “I sweat all day downtown over dresses for other girls to dance in. When my turn comes, I’m gonna have it. I can take care o’ myself” (289). According to Steve Chibnall, “mastery of ‘the Lindy Hop’ offered celebrity status and a sense of achievement to lowly ‘kitchen mechanics’, cooks and maids who massed on the sprung and constantly vibrating floor of the Savoy on a Thursday night” (58). Just as the kitchen mechanics wanted to gain a kind of celebrity status and sense of achievement, Tillie, a working-class woman herself, wants to be more than just a laundress. As a twenty year old Black working-class woman, Tillie believes that she has a right to make her own choices, despite her grandmother’s insistence that the dancing will kill her, and make a better life for herself. The Lindy Hop is not only a means for her to temporarily escape her working-class worries, but, hopefully, a more permanent one if she can become a hostess.

Besides Tillie’s obvious plans to use the Lindy Hop as a means to escape her working-class position, Fisher’s story also describes how, through dancing, other Black, working-class youth feel released from the daily grind. Upon dancing in the Lindy Hop competition,

the boy and girl were no longer merely a boy and girl; she no longer imprisoned in a stuffy little Bronx kitchen, her dark arms deep in suds; he no longer caged in an elevator, droning endless floor after floor; both, instead, abruptly released, their harbored impulses, accumulated during the long dull day like gunpowder poured into a barrel, touched off at last by a spark of music, exploding in joyous motion. (296)

Fisher’s description of the dancers exemplifies Robin D. G. Kelley’s assertion that the dance halls were places for the working-class to feel elevated from their status as mere workers, and to recuperate from their daily troubles. Fisher ends the paragraph by saying that “[w]ith never the loss of a precious step they bared themselves to the sorcery of rhythm which transformed them from shackled drudges into jubilant spirits of freedom” (296). The use of words like “imprisoned,” “caged,” and “shackled” paint their day jobs as oppressive, while words like “released,” “exploding,” and “freedom” establish the Lindy Hop as a liberating experience. Most definitely, Fisher portrays the Lindy Hop as a means by which these dancers find freedom and happiness.

However, Grammie is not swayed by this obvious display of happy dancing, and she continues to see the Lindy Hop as a dangerous activity. Though “[s]he watches the couples transformed by the music from overworked laborers to ‘jubilant spirits of freedom,’” she still thinks the “dancing and the music are signs of the Devil at work” (McCluskey 57). Before she even enters the ballroom, Grammie says, “Lord help—” and walks “forward into the mouth of hell” (293). Once inside, she observes the extravagant décor and reasons “[t]he devil sho’ know how to sweeten the pizen. No wonder you can’t keep ‘em home” (293). Grammie’s conviction that this contest is dangerous is so strong that she risks her own health by dancing during the contest to distract Tillie. Proclaiming that “[i]t’s my neck or Tillie’s,” she dances until she faints and successfully prohibits Tillie from winning the Lindy Hop contest.

Grammie’s undying will to prevent Tillie from becoming a dance hall hostess echoes the fears of the Black bourgeoisie and older generations. While Grammie does not appear concerned so much with Tillie’s work ethic, she certainly believes that dancing is immoral, insinuating the conflation of dancing with sex. Tillie’s sexuality is never overtly discussed in this story, but Grammie’s likening of the dance hall to hell resembles the fears that the ballroom may breed promiscuity. Working as a dance hall hostess would expose Tillie to many men who may try to convince her to sleep with them; Grammie probably fears that the pressures of working in such an environment would be the destruction of a “good girl” like her grand-daughter. Thus, Tillie’s refusal to follow her grandmother’s rules and participation in the Lindy Hop contest attest to the resistant qualities of dancing for a young, Black woman. In this way, Tillie asserts her independence and takes charge of her body to use for her own purpose.

Like “The Lindy Hop,” Ann Petry’s “In Darkness and Confusion” also illustrates the resistance that jazz culture provides for the Black, working-class woman. “In Darkness and Confusion” tells the story of the Harlem riots of 1943 from the view point of William Jones, a working-class, Black man. Jones lives in a top-floor apartment with his wife, Pink, and his niece, Annie May, and he anxiously awaits hearing from his son, Sam, who is enlisted in the Army in Georgia. The plot of the story revolves around William’s concern for his son’s well-being which is amplified when he hears that Sam is doing twenty years of hard labor for shooting a White military police officer who initially shot him in the stomach because he “wouldn’t go to the nigger end of the bus” (Petry, “In Darkness and Confusion” 268). He then witnesses a young, Black soldier being shot in a bar by a White cop, which spurs a riot in the streets.

Though she is not a central character, Annie May’s character coincides with the real life Black, working-class women who found dancing and jazz culture to be a form of escape and rebellion. Her choice of clothing and makeup resembles that of a female zoot suiter of the time: “Too thin. Too much lipstick. Their dresses were too short and too tight” (Petry, “In Darkness and Confusion” 264).² Moreover, her nonchalant attitude toward her job and her questionable conduct creates a chasm between her and William. Like the older generations and Black bourgeoisie who coupled dancing with sexual promiscuity, William suspects that Annie May’s late nights are probably spent engaging in disreputable activities.

When Annie May returns home at four o'clock in the morning, he thinks, "Probably she was out dancing" (256). But he quickly considers the alternative that she was doing more than just dancing. In fact, he even thinks that she is involved in prostitution or "treating."³ William knows "that she didn't earn enough money to pay for all the cheap, bright-colored dresses she was forever buying" (264). To William, Annie May and her friends' behavior is inappropriate because it does not fit within his definition of femininity. When he sees them outside a movie theater, he is appalled that "[t]hey were all chewing gum and they nudged each other and talked too loud and laughed too loud. They stared hard at every man who went past them" (264). He even confronts her saying, "nice girls ain't runnin' around the streets at four o'clock in the mornin'" (271). Of course, Annie May just ignores or laughs at her uncle, and she seems to almost take pleasure in the fact that her behavior bothers him so much.

Through her dress and behavior, Annie May stands as a rebellious character. Robin Lucy explains that "Annie May is a 'zoot girl' who, like the male zoot-suiters of the period, dressed the body as a defiant declaration of resistance to prescribed racial and economic roles" (17). Likewise, Paige Dougherty Delano believes that "[l]ike oppositional zoot suiters, Annie May emerges as a disorderly woman whose disturbing appearance must now be read as disturbing the pillars of racism and the sex/gender system" (59). In this way, Annie May's desire for fun and escape in her leisure time activities leads her to resist the prescribed roles for her race and gender. Unlike her uncle, she refuses to accept the middle-class notions of respectability, and she and her friends, instead, form their own ideas about Black femininity. Like the women Tera Hunter describes in Atlanta dance halls, Annie May defines femininity in a way that disturbs the formerly upheld belief in White femininity as the only form of womanhood. Annie May and her friends' "lipstick also marks an unstable/unruly female identity, suggesting public, sexual young women....The girls' 'staring' at men shows their active presence, their refusal to accept the passive roles assigned them by Black men and white society" (Delano 58-59). Luis Alvarez claims that in combining both men and women's clothing while wearing heavy makeup, "female zoot suiters transgressed the popular boundaries of femininity and masculinity" and "used their own bodies to simultaneously extend the limits of womanhood and craft an alternative female version of wartime masculinity that emphasized their independence and cultural difference" (108). These women did not conform to acceptable forms of female "wartime masculinity" such as the "Rosie the Riveter" image of dutiful factory worker; instead, they chose to take on a resistive form of female masculinity that allowed them sexual freedom as well as independence from patriarchal figures. Alvarez explains that "[b]y challenging notions of feminine beauty, sexuality, and race that prescribed how they should behave, they discarded the submissive roles that parents, middle-class activists, and even their zoot boyfriends expected them to play" (108). As a zoot girl, in both dress and behavior, Annie May resists the mainstream notions of femininity as well as her uncle's and the Black bourgeoisie's restrictions on her sexuality. She embraces activities such as dancing and sexual play that offer her a form of escape from her status as a domestic worker.

In addition, Annie May also values leisure time over work time which stands against her uncle's and the Black bourgeoisie's strong work ethic. Annie May often shows up late for work or skips work altogether. At one point, William even asks her, "How do you expect to keep a job when you don't show up half the time?" (Petry, "In Darkness and Confusion" 256). Yet, Annie May's nonchalant response, "I can always get another one," proves that work does not concern her (256). Instead, William suspects that "she thought he was a fool for working so hard" (256). Rather than trying to live up to the standards of the middle-class work ethic, Annie May finds pleasure in dancing, shopping, and, perhaps, even sexual play. As Robin Lucy explains, Annie May, "refus[es] to accept her place as a domestic worker within the private household of a white employer" (18). Thus, Annie May's refusal to adopt the middle-class value of a strong work ethic is another way that she rebels against the expectations for her as a Black, working-class woman.

By the end of the story, Ann Petry fully cements Annie May's as a rebellious character who appears completely aware of her actions. As the riot commences, people begin looting White businesses and William sees Annie May in a dress shop: "there was something so ferocious about the way her dark hands gripped the naked model that he resisted the onward movement of the crowd to stare in fascination" (Petry, "In Darkness and Confusion" 289). At first, William does not understand why anyone would still be in a shop stripped of all its merchandise, but Annie May's intentions with the mannequin have nothing to do with stealing:

Her hands crept around the throat of the model and she sent it hurtling through the air above the heads of the crowd. It landed short of a window across the street. The legs shattered. The head rolled to the curb. The waist snapped neatly in two....Annie May stood in the empty window and laughed with the crowd when someone kicked the torso into the street. (289)

At this point, William has a revelation and realizes the catalyst for Annie May's disregard for work. The fact that the mannequin has a "pinkish torso" conflates the image with that of the White woman or, rather, the many White women who have employed Annie May. Though her clothing and behavior throughout the story resist dominant notions of femininity, Robin Lucy believes that "[d]uring the riot, Annie May's defiance takes the form of a symbolic act against a white and female world" (19). Upon witnessing this scene, William "felt that now for the first time he understood her. She had never had anything but badly paying jobs—working for young white women who probably despised her" (Petry, "In Darkness and Confusion" 289-90). In this moment of outrage, Annie May transcends simply dressing as a zoot girl, behaving in an "unfeminine" way, or showing up late to work; she unleashes her anger on the form of a White woman, proving that she is consciously aware of her protest against the White and middle-class culture. Moreover, Annie May's outburst allows William to relate to her and even compare her to his beloved son: "She was like Sam on that bus in Georgia. She didn't want just the nigger end of things, and here in Harlem there wasn't anything else for her.

All along she'd been trying the only way she knew how to squeeze out of life a little something for herself" (290). With this in mind, William "abandons his middle-class value system, he takes part in violence," and "he undergoes a ritual transformation, completing the symmetry of the rebellious family and closing the generation gap by identifying with Sam and Annie May" (Adams 57). In the end, William finally understands the political importance of Annie May's rebellious attitude. Rather than seeing her [mis]behavior as a sign of laziness or silliness, William sees Annie May as a woman who seeks a little pleasure in a life filled with racial and gender oppression.

Therefore, the portrayal of jazz culture in "In Darkness and Confusion" is one of a powerful, resistive nature. Embodied in the character of Annie May, this resistive nature stands as a force against the restrictive expectations of the dominant culture. In opposition to the older generation, the Black bourgeoisie, and her White employers, Annie May is an independent, sexual woman, and "[h]er flamboyant dress, her man watching and her Lindy-hopping assert her visibility, her presence, in the urban environment" (Lucy 19). Robin Lucy believes "Annie May is a female figure of the improvisational and potentially revolutionary energy of the cultural forms of the black urban and working class which during the 1940s Ralph Ellison began to associate with new forms of political power" (19). Refusing to be the passive, submissive woman that everyone expects of a Black, working-class woman, Annie May acts out her rebellion through dance, dress, and her final violent outburst during the riot.

While "The Lindy Hop" and "In Darkness and Confusion" promote jazz culture and dance as a freeing, joyful alternative to labor, Ann Petry's 1946 novel, *The Street*, offers a far more dismal look at both the work life and leisure time of a Black, working-class woman. Nonetheless, the only lighthearted moments in the novel are the scenes that include jazz music or dance. As in "The Lindy Hop" and "In Darkness and Confusion," *The Street* revolves around the lives of Black, working-class people who seek escape from their hard lives. Throughout the novel, Petry repeatedly describes the barriers that the main character, Lutie Johnson, faces as she struggles to reach the American Dream⁴ for herself and her son, Bub. In every attempt she makes to earn more money, to move into a better living situation, and to keep her son out of trouble, Lutie is matched against racism, sexism, and class exploitation: forces that confine her until she lashes out and kills.

The overwhelming bleakness of the novel is lifted only on a few occasions: primarily when Lutie visits nightclubs. In these scenes, not only is Lutie's sense of happiness and release apparent but also the joy that the other working-class patrons gain from visiting the nightclubs. While walking down the street, Lutie thinks, "[w]e don't have time enough or money enough to live like other people because the women have to work until they become drudges" (Petry, *The Street* 186). However, the Junto bar offers solace for these working-class women and Lutie: "Young women coming home from work—dirty, tired, depressed—looked forward to the moment when they would change their clothes and head toward the gracious spaciousness of the Junto" (144).

In fact, even standing in front of the Junto “offered a certain measure of escape” from the coldness of the street because “the light streaming from the windows and the music from its jukebox created an oasis of warmth” (141). Even the ambiance of the décor in the Junto “pushed the world of other people’s kitchen sinks back where it belonged and destroyed the existence of dirty streets and small shadowed rooms” (146). Meanwhile, the bartenders’ “courteous friendliness was a heart-warming thing that helped rebuild egos battered and bruised during the course of the day’s work” (143). Lutie herself, who seems more pensive than the other patrons as well as separated from their communal fun, goes to the Junto “so that she could for a moment capture the illusion of having some of the things that she lacked” (144). According to Johanna X. K. Garvey, “She wants to hear voices, see people, enjoy the music: find an escape from the daily struggles to survive” (132-33). In fact, Lutie observes that the people in the Junto have “a pleasant gaiety and charm about all of them” and that she “looked young, very young and happy in the mirror” at the bar (Petry, *The Street* 145). Thus, just sitting in the Junto and listening to the music provides an escape for Lutie and the other working-class patrons.

Furthermore, social dancing provides an escape as well; simply dancing to a radio at a party in someone’s living room is equivalent to “being let out of jail to be able to forget about the houseful of kids, forget about not having any money” (Petry, *The Street* 175). Similar to Tera Hunter’s assertion that the Black body can be used as an instrument of pleasure in leisure time rather than an instrument of work, Petry claims, “their bodies were the only source of relief from the pressure under which they lived” (206). The dancing, the partying, the music and drinking in nightclubs all promote using the body for pleasure, rather than saving it for the purpose of work alone. Petry’s novel illustrates the many pressures and confines the Black working-class, particularly women, faced in Harlem during this time period. This time spent at parties and nightclubs are the only times that the characters appear to feel any sort of happiness and release from their lives on “the street.” Even though their relief may be brief, jazz music, dance, and nightclub culture afforded these people the opportunity to feel liberated from the confines of work.

While the release the frequenters feel in the Junto proves that jazz music and culture offers an escape for the Black working-class, Lutie has even higher aspirations of completely escaping her working-class status by becoming a jazz singer. While in the Junto, she feels free enough to sing along with the jukebox, revealing her captivating singing voice to the entire bar. Boots Smith, a leader of a band that plays at the Casino nightclub, approaches her and tells her that she could make a living singing. Though she is aware that he is interested in her sexually, she plays along with him in hopes that she may secure a job with his band which would “mean she and Bub could leave 116th Street” (Petry, *The Street* 151). As she goes to sleep that night, she “started building a picture of herself standing before a microphone in a long taffeta dress that whispered sweetly as she moved; of a room full of dancers who paused in their dancing to listen as she sang. Their faces were expectant, worshiping, as they looked up at her” (207).

Jacqueline Jones explains that the life of the blues singer was especially alluring to Black, working-class women at this time: “it was the entertainment field that fueled the dreams of black girls who yearned for life’s work of glamour and triumph...these singers beckoned listeners away from the routine of the white woman’s kitchen and into a glittering world of public adulation” (220). Lutie yearns for the admiring gazes of the public, but she is far more concerned with making enough money to leave “the street.” As she sings in the Casino, she thinks about “leaving the street with its dark hallways, its mean, shabby rooms...She and Bub were getting out and away, and they would never be back” (Petry, *The Street* 222). Her night of singing remains in “a blur and a mist of happiness and contentment because she had found the means of getting away from the street” (223). Just as Tillie in “The Lindy Hop” plans to escape her dead-end job and working-class status through dancing, Lutie plans to do the same through singing.⁵ For both of these Black women, the music and dance of jazz not only provide them moments of escape while actually performing but also hope for a better future. In this way, jazz culture and dance as represented in *The Street* is a means of escape and freedom from the drudgery that Black, working-class men and women face on a daily basis.

Finally, the power of the Lindy Hop and jazz culture for Black, working-class women is apparent in the film *Stompin’ at the Savoy*. The 1992 made-for-television film weaves the stories of four black female domestics who follow their dreams in New York and escape their daily troubles by dancing at the Savoy Ballroom on their nights off of work. The story opens in 1939 with Esther, played by Lynn Whitfield, describing the circumstances of the Great Depression and the Great Migration. Each of the other characters—Pauline played by Vanessa Williams, Alice played by Jasmine Guy, and Dorothy played by Vanessa Bell Calloway—are introduced as domestic workers who share a room on their one night off a week. Of course, their favorite activity for their night off is going to the Savoy Ballroom to dance. Therefore, this film features several Lindy Hop scenes choreographed by Frankie Manning and Norma Miller, two former members of Whitey’s Lindy Hoppers⁶.

Unlike Tillie in “The Lindy Hop” and Annie May in “In Darkness and Confusion,” the four women in *Stompin’ at the Savoy* do not face criticism and restrictions from their parents or guardians. In fact, amongst all of the other issues the film attempts to tackle, the resistance to dancing and jazz culture from the Black bourgeoisie and older generation is left untouched. Instead, the Savoy Ballroom remains the one place in the film where the characters escape the racism and sexism they face in the outside world; dancing is always portrayed in a positive light. All of the blissful moments of the film—Esther returning to Harlem after a season in Saratoga, the celebration of Esther winning two-hundred dollars, and the New Year’s Eve party—are accompanied by dancing. Even at Alice and Ernest’s wedding in Dorothy’s apartment, someone shouts, “Hey, I thought this was a party. I wanna dance,” and the music begins (*Stompin’ at the Savoy*). In fact, the four women value dancing above all other activities. When Pauline asks the women to go to the Lafayette nightclub with her to support her in a talent contest, Esther exclaims, “Pauline, we only get one night a week off. I’m sorry, but I’m going to the Savoy” (*Stompin’ at the Savoy*).

Pauline says, “You mean to tell me all ‘ya’ll, my so called friends, would rather go dancing than cheer me on at the Lafayette?” to which they simultaneously answer, “yeah” (*Stompin' at the Savoy*). After a moment, Pauline laughs and says, “So would I” (*Stompin' at the Savoy*). As Pauline tells Walter, “we’re here every Kitchen Mechanics’ Night,” indicating their commitment to dancing (*Stompin' at the Savoy*). The scenes of the women Lindy Hopping at the Savoy are the most carefree and joyous parts of the film; all of the characters are laughing, smiling, and enjoying themselves. As the film progresses and grows increasingly serious, the dance scenes dissipate. By the end of the film, Esther and Walter stand alone in front of the now dead Savoy, and Esther claims, “I’ll never forgive LaGuardia for shutting down the Savoy” (*Stompin' at the Savoy*)⁷. With Alice dead from tuberculosis, Dorothy living with her mother after a nervous breakdown, and Pauline and Esther’s friendship and romantic relationships shattered, the final scene remains bleak except for the brief cut to scenes of the characters dancing at the Savoy. Meant to be scenes from Esther’s memory, these portrayals of the characters smiling and laughing while dancing cement the importance of the Lindy Hop for Black, working-class women who need an escape from the drudgery and daily grind of their jobs.

The importance of the Lindy Hop, swing music, and jazz culture for the four Black women extends beyond just an escape from their jobs. The dreams these women have of upward mobility are connected to their love of swing music and jazz culture. In the brief opening narration, Esther clarifies that connection by saying, “All those nights we used to jaunt up to the Savoy. I guess we all had our hopes and our dreams. And I always knew I’d make mine come true” (*Stompin' at the Savoy*). Like Lutie in *The Street*, Pauline sees singing in a nightclub as her ticket out of domestic work. Though Esther originally believes playing the numbers will result in her success, she eventually realizes that the men she meets dancing in nightclubs can invest in her dreams. Additionally, both Dorothy and Esther are deeply upset by the news of drummer Chick Webb’s death. Upon hearing the news, Dorothy runs out of the restaurant and immediately calls Esther saying, “I feel worse than when my own uncle died” (*Stompin' at the Savoy*). Both women admire Chick Webb as not only a beloved musician but also a role model. As a child, Webb suffered from tuberculosis of the spine which left him disabled and with health problems until his death in 1939. Nonetheless, he led one of the most popular bands of the swing era, which developed and performed the song “Stompin’ at the Savoy.” Esther tells Dorothy on the telephone, “He was something, wasn’t he, girl? He was colored and crippled...He didn’t let nothing stop him from what he wanted to do” (*Stompin' at the Savoy*). Esther’s interpretation of Webb mirrors her own declaration in the face of adversity to the opening of her own beauty shop: “That’s what wrong with people. They always tell themselves no before they get started. Don’t think they deserve nothing. Well, ain’t nobody gonna tell me no, and I sure as hell ain’t gonna tell myself” (*Stompin' at the Savoy*). Similarly, Dorothy exits the phone booth talking about a seemingly unrelated topic: the coat her mistress, Mrs. Bennett, gave her. However, she quickly switches into a rant crying, “I want my own place. What’s to stop me? I’m gonna get my own place” (*Stompin' at the Savoy*). For Dorothy and Esther, jazz culture is more than just an escape from day-to-day troubles; it is also the fodder for their dreams of upward mobility.

As Morris Dickstein explains, “[t]he fantasy culture of the 1930s...is all about movement, not the desperate simulation of movement we find in the road stories but movement that suggests genuine freedom” (238). The Savoy Ballroom provided a place where Black, working-class women could reclaim their bodies and remember they are human. As an interracial dance floor and as a place where domestics were “ladies” and not simply workers, these women could momentarily escape the oppression they faced in their daily lives. They could dream about a world in which their dreams could come true.

Even though these women are not faced with any opposition from the older generation, they do assert independence in regards to their sexual relationships that would most likely incite fear in family members and the Black bourgeoisie. Dorothy benefits from her relationship with a White man when he secures an apartment for her. Pauline flirts with Calvin, a nightclub owner, which results in a job, as well as an apartment he rents for her after they become a couple. Finally, Esther sleeps with Calvin in exchange for a liquor license so that she can open up her own liquor store. Esther’s behavior is considered deplorable by nearly all of the characters, but all of the women’s interest in dancing and sexual relationships with men would have been suspect to the older generation and the middle-class. All of the women, except Alice, engage in sexual relationships before marriage; many would probably blame this sexual independence on the dance halls that provided spaces for women to meet men, to move their bodies in a sensual manner, and to reclaim their bodies for their own pleasure. The dance floor provided a chance for these women to boldly approach men. In fact, in one scene, Pauline even struts across the floor studying a group of men as if she is evaluating each one’s potential before she motions to one of them to dance with her. Therefore, besides the escape and freedom that the Savoy Ballroom afforded these Black, working-class women, it also allowed them a place to explore their sexuality and resist the expectations for young women to be chaste, passive, and sexual objects for men.

While the resistance of the older generations and the Black bourgeoisie is not apparent in the film, Pauline’s interactions with her White mistresses does illustrate the domestic worker’s rebellion against the expectation for the Black body to be used only for labor in the White household. Within the first few minutes of the film, Pauline’s dissatisfaction with her job is apparent through her aggravation with and disdain for the mistress’s misbehaving children. The White mistress asks her if she is coming back that evening, Pauline’s one night a week off. With a “humph” and dismissive gesture as if the idea is ridiculous, Pauline puts on her coat and leaves the house. She tells her friends, “Every Thursday this woman asks me, ‘Are you comin’ back this evening?’ You’d think she’d know by now I ain’t” (*Stompin’ at the Savoy*). In addition, she reveals her plan to lie to her mistress so that she can skip work on Saturday and enter a talent contest: “I’m going to get sick Saturday and see about amateur night at the Harlem Opera House” (*Stompin’ at the Savoy*). Eventually, she loses her job, and while she does not specify what happened, she claims, “I couldn’t take that woman and her uniform anymore” (*Stompin’ at the Savoy*). Even in her new job, Pauline refuses to be subservient to the White mistress.

When the mistress tells her that she needs to stay to do the laundry, Pauline refuses saying that it was not her fault that the water heater was broken and that she scrubbed the walls and floors instead. The mistress tells her that she will fire her if she leaves, so Pauline asks to be paid for the work she has done. Pauline fits Trudier Harris's description of the "militant maid" in literature: "[t]he militants, usually northern maids pictured in northern settings, carry with them the almost mythical belief that the North is a freer place for black people" (24). Because of that belief these maids feel free to "talk back, to be defiant in reaction to the sixteen-hour days their mistresses may want to squeeze into eight, to assert themselves whenever possible" (24). Pauline is the one character in the film who openly defies her mistress and refuses to stay late or do extra work. Her militant behavior serves as evidence of her refusal to be thought of as simply a wage worker, and as simply a body to be used for White women. Instead, Pauline asserts herself—even if it means the loss of a job—so that she can go dancing on Thursday nights and reclaim her body for herself.

Thus, the female characters in *Stompin' at the Savoy* not only find escape and freedom in dancing at the Savoy but also a way to assert their sexuality and rebel against the expectations for their time and bodies. The film presents these women as independent characters who are willing to engage in dubious behavior to achieve their dreams. Coming to the subject matter nearly fifty years later, the filmmakers could present the sexual independence of the female characters as more acceptable and without the resistance of the Black bourgeoisie or older generation. At the same time, this film does not glorify this behavior, at least not in the case of Esther's overt attempt to exchange sex for financial gain; in fact, the ending—with Esther rejected by both her friend and lover—shows the negative effects of using one's sexuality to gain financial security. Instead, the final scene juxtaposes Esther's loneliness with a collage of scenes of the women happily dancing at the Savoy: a nostalgic look at their earlier, supposedly less complicated, lives. Perhaps this nostalgic lens is a result of the overall nostalgia for the 1930s and 1940s that Americans felt during the late 1980s and early 1990s when the swing revival took root. In any case, the final scene does reassert that Lindy Hopping at the Savoy remains the most carefree, joyful experience in the film.

Rudolph Fisher's "The Lindy Hop," Ann Petry's "In Darkness and Confusion," Ann Petry's *The Street*, and Debbie Allen's *Stompin' at the Savoy* all portray jazz music and dance as an escape for Black, working-class women in the late 1920s through the 1940s. The descriptions in all of these works of the joy and gaiety that these characters feel while dancing or visiting a nightclub is set in contrast to the drudgery that they face each day at work. Moreover, by using their bodies as a source of leisure rather than an instrument of work, these characters resist the older generation's and Black bourgeoisie's expectation for Black, working-class women to be respectable, hard workers. Thus, by moving their bodies in dance, they reclaim their bodies for themselves. For Black Studies scholars, these examples of the power of the Lindy Hop and Black dance illustrate the importance of counter-hegemonic cultural practices to African Americans, particularly before the Civil Rights Movement.

Not only did the Lindy Hop provide joy and escape amidst the confines of a segregated society, but the dance also enabled Black, working-class women to resist the many restrictions placed upon them because of their race, class, and gender. The social steps achieved on the dance floor may seem small, but they were significant because the dancers, musicians, and athletes of the time “laid the groundwork for postwar cultural *and* political expression” (Caponi-Tabery xv). Dancers during the swing era anticipated the culture of the Civil Rights Movement in that they were reclaiming their bodies from White employers; celebrating African American expression, like jazz music, and worldview; and rejecting their status as merely wage laborers and, instead, forming their own communities and identities separate from the stereotypes of African Americans. Therefore, dance and other leisure activities held, and still holds, great importance for African Americans. As Jacqui Malone contends, “African American vernacular dance, like jazz music, mirrors the values and worldview of its creators. Even in the face of tremendous adversity, it evinces an affirmation and celebration of life....[B]lack dance is a source of energy, joy, and inspiration; a spiritual antidote to oppression” (23-24). Indeed, Black, working-class women were able to revolt against repression and find joy even when faced with racism, sexism, and class exploitation. Jazz music and dance transformed them into, in the words of Rudolph Fisher, “jubilant spirits of freedom.”

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Endnotes

¹ I use the term "jazz culture" to encompass a variety of activities similar to how Robin D. G. Kelley uses the term "hipster culture." I primarily emphasize the use of the word jazz to mean both music and dance—particularly the Lindy Hop. However, I do not limit my interpretation of "jazz culture" to music and dance but use it for other activities and the community that surrounds jazz. In many cases, this culture can be seen amongst frequenters of nightclubs in Harlem during this time period. In my definition of jazz music, I include that music which is a subset or closely related to jazz—primarily the blues and swing.

² In *The Power of the Zoot*, Luis Alvarez describes female zoot suiters as wearing heavy makeup, particularly lipstick and mascara, and short dresses and bobby socks.

³ Treating was a dating practice in which women would exchange sexual favors for gifts, meals, or admission to dances or movies.

⁴ The American Dream typically consists of overcoming poverty through hard work and perseverance. In Lutie's case, reaching the American Dream would mean that she could afford an apartment or home in a middle-class neighborhood away from the dangers of "the street."

⁵ Unfortunately, Lutie's chances of becoming a professional musician do not seem as promising as Tillie's chances of becoming a dance hall hostess. Written far later than Fisher's short story, *The Street* portrays the menacing side of jazz in light of the commoditization of jazz music by Whites. Every path Lutie pursues to a singing career is blocked by a White man—first Junto and later the man at the Crosse School for Singers. These men see her as a sexual object, and their control over the music business (or, as in Junto's case, entertainment in general) provide them with the power to squelch Lutie's dream unless she submits to their desires. Though the commoditization of jazz destroys some of the power that jazz offers the Black working-class, the novel still illustrates the importance that jazz music and dance had in providing an escape from the daily grind.

⁶ Whitey's Lindy Hoppers (also known as Whitey's Hoppin' Maniacs) was a group of professional Lindy Hoppers organized by Herbert "Whitey" White in the early 1930's. Whitey often had numerous groups (up to twelve at one point) which he would send all over the world to perform the Lindy Hop either on stage or in films. Most of the groups disbanded by 1942 when many of the male dancers were sent to war.

⁷ In 1943, Deputy Police Commissioner Cornelius O'Leary, encouraged by the U.S. Army and Navy, served notice to the Savoy that its license would be revoked because of "immorality and vice charges." The Army and Navy contended that female dancers at the Savoy (inferring Black women) were prostitutes infecting servicemen with venereal disease (Giordano 111).