Àṣẹ / Transformation" are also now engaged in work that has an overt social or ecological consciousness. It stands to reason that an artform that aspires to make transformation would eventually link with the Earth. *Ẹbọ dá*—the sacrifice has been accepted—ensures that the work of Carlos, Jones, and Bridgforth will be passed on through an ever-widening artistic lineage and legacy.

Can I go? Can I travel in
and out and through? On the verge, right there, right there, almost, it's peeking through, it's there, oh yes, almost, here, almost, here, but no. No. I stop. Almost. Almost there. Not quite. But maybe. It's lurking there.
Waiting for me to step up, for me and it to be one.

PART ONE

The Ensemble / *Ẹgbẹ́* / Community

This preparation [for making jazz] begins long before prospective performers seize upon music as the central focus of their lives.

—Paul Berliner[1]

Jazz is not only a music to define, it is a culture. Which is to say that not only might one study Bunk and Monk as individual musicians in a broad stream of musicians . . . One also can consider the immeasurably complex worlds through which they moved.

—Robert G. O'Meally,
Brent Hayes Edwards,
and Farah Jasmine Griffin[2]

THE JAZZ AESTHETIC in theatre relies on a particular brand of collaboration that extends beyond the rehearsals and the productions. It is a binding and intimate collaboration that blends daily caretaking with apprenticeship, which closely resembles the Yoruba concept of *ẹgbẹ́*, a group of people joined by a common goal. My experience with *Ìṣẹ̀ṣẹ̀*-based communities in the United States and my work with *Òrìṣà* communities in Nigeria have informed my understanding of *ẹgbẹ́*, in which members are expected to consistently, and, among some communities, unquestioningly, support the group's needs and traditions. The *ẹgbẹ́* is an intricate strand in the social structure; it teaches community building, responsibility, and accountability. Perhaps the greatest breach in an *ẹgbẹ́* is lack of reliability. One's actions are situated within the frame of the *ẹgbẹ́* and within the context of the larger society. *Ẹgbẹ́* is also related to the idea of tribe in the sharing of customs and the family-like closeness of its members. In an important way both the concept of *ẹgbẹ́*, which exists within specific sociopolitical structures, and the concept of tribe, which is often conceptualized as its own unit independent of city-state formations, are useful in understanding the relations that bind theatrical jazz practitioners. The jazz aesthetic can trace its lineage both within traditional theatre and through its own independent genealogy. In my usage throughout, tribe

is a reclaimed term of communal pride rather than an evaluative description of a group's social development.

Through continual and varied interactions the *egbẹ́* itself evolves into a process so that *egbẹ́* slides from a noun to a verb—caretaking, truth telling, self-confrontation with the *egbẹ́* as witness, an organic apprenticeship in which the members both model for and learn from each other. The daily interaction with the tribe serves to solidify the aesthetic—be present, tell the truth, work for peace and joy. As Wynton Marsalis puts it, "The choices you make on the bandstand are exactly like the choices you're going to make in society."[3] In a similar vein, in discussing what the performance ensemble teaches us about life, Daniel Alexander Jones suggested, "A selfish decision fails every time."[4]

The jazz aesthetic tribe is the *egbẹ́*. While some U.S.-based Yoruba practitioners believe that *egbẹ́* is for life, a Yoruba proverb asserts, "*Òrìṣà bí o kò bá lè gbèmí ṣe mí bí o ṣe bá mi.*" The proverb can be literally translated as "Divinity, if you don't support me, restore me to my original state," and, more precisely to the point being made here—"*Òrìṣà*, if you cannot help me, leave me the way you found me."[5] This suggests that while *egbẹ́*s function at the behest of *égún* (ancestors) and *Òrìṣà* (Divine forces), one's own *Orí* (head, destiny) is also a Divinity that must be considered when choosing or being chosen by an *egbẹ́* for participation. *Orí* may determine that a shift in a Divine relationship is necessary. Commitment to an *egbẹ́* is serious, and undoing that commitment requires Divine support. This complex relationship between the individual, the *egbẹ́*, and the Divine creates interlocking personal, communal, and spiritual responsibilities. Through this binding union, the tradition preserves and reimagines itself. Once members are bound to each other, it is no small gesture to turn away. One can participate in an *egbẹ́* in support of community-building even while having conflict with individual members. If one's *Orí* counsels against *egbẹ́* participation, the individual may leave but the *egbẹ́* continues. In this way, the tradition will prevail in spite of individual human conflicts. Commitment and sustained connection result in more than collaboration; they generate community and collective responsibility.

WYNTON MARSALIS: "No one thinks that maybe a democratic act means that you have to surrender something that's yours and give it to someone else. That is, in essence, the proposition of jazz. You can be the greatest soloist in the world, but if you don't have anybody to play with you're just not going to sound good. It is important for the student to view herself or himself in the context of everyone else. And that requires listening."*

* *Making the Music: A Teacher's Guide to Jazz*, 5.

When the Warfield Center for African and African American Studies first presented Sharon's love conjure/blues *in the spring of 2004 there were eight cast members with Helga Davis conducting. When the production was remounted in the fall of 2004 the cast had expanded to eleven with the inclusion of two musicians—Fred Cash Jr. on bass and Greg Rickard on piano—and teenaged* Yoruba priest Olaiya, *who served to crystallize Isadora Africa Jr.'s presence in the work. There was also a dramaturg who developed a lobby installation as part of the performance experience. Returning from the spring production were Florinda Bryant, Daniel Alexander Jones, Daniel Dodd Ellis, Sean Tate, Sonja Perryman, and me. Gina Houston replaced Marlah Fulgham, and Carsey Walker's lines were redistributed throughout the company. Because most of us had worked together before, we brought a level of comfort and familiarity to the experience. This didn't mean that we always got along—in fact some of the brewing rifts among us at that time were not directly confronted until much later. What we brought was a knowledge of one another that generated a critical trust in our ability to carry out the work. In addition to the daily casual phone calls and meals that some of us shared, Helga also scheduled outings that would help us experience each other in new ways. We spent one afternoon at the Pedernales River, where I talked about Ọ̀ṣun and we played in the water to her trickling laughter. On another occasion, we gathered one evening at my home for an informal meal. Most of us played, teased, and talked trash throughout that night, but one person stood apart from the group.*

I recognized the behavior because it was so similar to my own. For years, I had seen Laurie, Daniel, Sharon, Florinda, Sonn (as many of us call Sonja Perryman), and Zell Miller III as a closed group of intimate friends. The inside jokes, the shared histories, the productions together seemed to keep me on the outside of what appeared to be the "in group." At that time, I did not realize that the supposed "in group" actually bonded because of their outsider status—outside mainstream life, outside mainstream theatre, outside the habits/values of their blood families. When invited to meals or movies, I would shyly decline, thinking that I would be an intruder in spite of the fact that I had been invited. I was closed to the challenges and uncertainties of personal interaction as well as to the demands of being present on stage. The two go hand in hand. I thought my option not to participate created a kind of safety through invisibility, when in reality the very safety I sought was akin to being in a room with no air—I was choking rather than saving myself. Art requires the courage to expose oneself, and the joyful foolishness to risk certainty. What I didn't understand then was that the jazz aesthetic is incorporative; it borrows, includes, stirs many elements into the roux. The people who develop the jazz aesthetic are—like the aesthetic itself—an amalgam. This is not an ẹgbẹ́ of similar people. Indeed, the power of the group is directly related to the distinctiveness of each member. It is an ẹgbẹ́ based on the deep understanding that one must be present to fully live, must feel and tell the truth, must risk being accepted or included, must be absolutely one's self. And when you create such realities together, you work to protect and preserve that.

Ẹgbẹ́ helps sustain the breath of life.

So when one of the members of the newly constituted love conjure/blues company chose to stand apart during all the party activities—in fact, once, left the house to sit alone on the concrete driveway while others ate, listened to music, and joked inside

—I immediately recognized the simultaneous desire to be rooted inside the group and the debilitating fear that I did not fit, that I would not measure up. By removing oneself from the group, one shouts, "You can't rely on me. I am not to be trusted." This is the enactment of passive/aggressive violence that lives as a rupture inside of the group and reveals one's inability to sustain the rigors of an ẹgbẹ.

The jazz aesthetic relies on everyone standing inside of her or his own power, and supporting those around them. This happens in performance and in life. The daily conversations, making of meals, planning events, gossip—all are ways to preserve the jazz aesthetic, to solidify the clan, to make the tribe fully known to each other. This everyday intimacy creates a confidence and willing risk-taking in performance.

When one lives tribally, eventually the work becomes a way of life. The rules and structures developed through the making of the work begin to supersede the norms operating outside of the group. Without really thinking about it or making it happen, one begins to move with the other tribe members in mind. The phone calls throughout the day, the e-mails containing bits of work and thoughts about all manner of things, remembering birthdays, the unplanned "roll ups" when the *ẹgbẹ́* whisks you away from your planned activities for a trip to the barbecue joint—all of this is as important as the rehearsals in the studio. One learns the ways of the artistic work in the everyday encounters with one another. These encounters teach spontaneity and flexibility, the importance of play, and significantly, the role of impulse in shaping the jazz aesthetic. When tribe members surprise you by showing up at your job and tempting you with an escape from those tensions for a moment, your decision about joining them or remaining at work has everything to do with facing that moment in performance where one can go against the expected or remain solidly predictable. Exercising this muscle in everyday life primes one for flexing that same muscle of spontaneity and freedom in performance. The continuity of the tradition is built in the everyday interactions; this makes it truly a lifestyle, not only a way of making art.

A primary virtue of an *ẹgbẹ́* is access to those who are trained in the work. Rather than beginning with the confusion and resistance that often accompanies an introduction to theatrical jazz, an *ẹgbẹ́* can begin at a deeper place. Confusion, uncertainty, and doubt may still appear, but there is significantly less resistance to the process for those who are trained, and indeed, there is an acceptance of confusion as a vital part of the internal and external work that must be done in embodying theatrical jazz. When Virginia Grise returned to Austin with a draft of *blu,* a script that was developed in the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) writing program and that later won

VIRGINIA GRISE: "This community understands my work at a base level. They allow me to really hear my work. They understand breath, punctuation, structure in ways that traditionally trained actors don't—so we begin a conversation about the work that's not from a place of explanation or defense of the aesthetic but from a deeper understanding. This is essential to my growth and very survival as an artist."*

* E-mail message to author, January 11, 2007.

the 2010 Yale Drama Series Award, she knew she could gather a cadre of artists able to engage with her jazz-inflected work. Grise had been an ensemble member with the Austin Project (tAP) for two years when she became one of two writers accepted into the prestigious CalArts Writing for Performance Program in 2006. Through her longstanding apprenticeship with Bridgforth and her participation in tAP, where she worked with Jones, Carlos, McCauley, and me, she came to develop her artistic identity through theatrical jazz principles. When *blu* was read in Austin, Grise immediately called on tAP members Florinda Bryant, Monique Cortez, Ana-Maurine Lara, Jen Margulies, and me, who were conversant with the requirements of theatrical jazz, along with Jackie Cuevas and Wura-Natasha Ogunji, who were a part of tAP extended family.[6] Grise's experience with casting in Austin reflects the maintenance of shared codes that evolve among dispersed artistic allies as they strive to preserve and deepen their aesthetic identities across disparate geographic regions.

An *ẹgbẹ́* needs diversity among the members in order to be resilient and ready. The skills that may be lacking in some may be present in others. This is the kind of community strength that is most apparent in urban life where the sheer variety of people creates the potential for shared overlapping power. This is the urbanness that Aristotle imagined when he considered his own locale, a city where different people were required to interact and thereby create the possibility for understanding each other and themselves. In his analysis of democratic spaces, Richard Sennett states, "a democracy supposes people can consider views other than their own."[7] Sennett suggests that in ancient Greek societies, this consideration of "other views" happened in the marketplace, where a wide range of people conducted various forms of business, and in the theatre, where the semicircular shape of the traditional Greek theatre allowed spectators to experience one another through the performance. This direct interaction with people unlike one's self, for Sennett, was at the heart of Aristotle's democracy. Democracy, at its best, is inclusive and inherently diverse. The urban environment provides a means for deeply knowing many truths; the more such varied truths exist in an *ẹgbẹ́* the more flexible and durable the *ẹgbẹ́* can be. City dwellers have the opportunity to know worlds beyond those of their immediate family. As Sennett points out, the city's diversity is not only in the range of ideas but, more importantly, in the range of behaviors that it can accommodate. It is this urbanness that spawned musical jazz, and this fact of urban complexity that was the childhood reality for Carlos, Jones, and Bridgforth. The experiences in the cities of their youth primed them for an aesthetic life rich in the urban density of jazz.

RICHARD SENNETT: "The essence of democracy lies in displacing conflict and difference from the realm of violence to a more peaceable, deliberative realm."*

* "The Spaces of Democracy," 12.

In the previous section of this book, I discuss the way in which Yoruba cosmology provides a useful method for understanding theatrical jazz. Because the diversity of urban life is fundamental to the development of jazz, and given the resonances between jazz and Yoruba worldviews noted earlier, it is not surprising that sixteenth-century Yoruba people were among the first urban African societies.[8] Family compounds were built around the *Ọba*'s, or king's, palace and the market.

Specialists developed, often in relationship to the life of the *Ọba*—metalworkers, praise singers, beaders, tailors, musicians—thus creating a web of interlocking relationships common in city life. Jazz and Yoruba life share an urban vitality.

In a Yoruba worldview, *àdúgbò*, or neighborhood, is integral to the well-being of an individual as it serves as a vehicle for social integration. In this way, *àdúgbò* has an intimate link to both *ẹgbẹ́* as community responsibility and to *iwà* as character. The importance of *iwà* in Yoruba cosmology is revealed in the fact that it is an attribute that is carried with a person until the end of her or his life. Most simply, *iwà* references character, but also includes grace, demeanor, and the very essence of a person that determines his or her inner and outer beauty. Tribal associations are with one's *ẹgbẹ́*, the people with whom one lives and works, while *àdúgbò* references more generally one's environment. Many Yoruba are more accustomed to naming the region of their birth and childhood as their identifying markers rather than finding identity under the colonially imposed title of Yoruba. Where you are from, where you were raised says much about your specific relationship to the world. In this way, one's neighborhood leaves an indelible stamp on one's personhood.

The tribalness that characterizes an *ẹgbẹ́* also relates to the apprentice–elder relationship that is used for learning the features of theatrical jazz. Within a community, the elder teaches directly and indirectly. As much learning occurs in the market when sniffing cheeses for an opening night reception as when rehearsing a script in the theatre. Learning theatrical jazz happens body to body, breath to breath; no matter how carefully I chart the work, this book cannot and should not replace the visceral knowledge exchanged between elder and apprentice. This relationship is one of the most profound correspondences between theatrical jazz and Yoruba-based spiritual practices. Although there has been a proliferation of published *Ifá* texts in the past fifteen years,[9] a priest cannot learn to divine by reading a book. Such training is *gb'ẹ̀kọ́*, receiving knowledge, or more precisely, *ikọ́ṣẹ́*, learning a skill through the transmission of wisdom from a master. Divination skill—as well as beading, drumming, feeding *Òrìṣà*, reciting *itanlẹ̀*, and other talents needed in Yoruba-based spiritual life—comes from sitting alongside a master and, over much time, remapping intuition and acquiring wisdom. Similarly, theatrical jazz is internalized through the inherent embodiment of rehearsals and daily living.

"YOU CAN'T WRITE THIS STUFF DOWN!"*
–LAURIE CARLOS

* Phone interview with author, June 16, 2008.

Within the *ẹgbẹ́* and apprentice–elder structure, there is a complex paradox. Although *ẹgbẹ́* requires a solemn and steadfast commitment, there are times when the apprentice must break from the elder, when the *Orí* (personal destiny) of the apprentice dictates that she/he must find a path separate from that of the elder—joined to *ẹgbẹ́* yet separate from the elder at the same time.

In jazz, the legendary example of such a split occurred in 1923 when Louis Armstrong decided to leave his mentor King Oliver in order to fully explore his own distinctive sound. When Armstrong left New Orleans to join Oliver in Chicago, the two developed a tandem trumpet playing that let them share the role of lead trumpet. Armstrong felt constrained by this shared playing, and his wife, the pianist Lil Hardin, suggested that Oliver did not want to be eclipsed by Armstrong's growing skill and popularity.[10] The apprentice left the master, and became a master himself.

It is a delicate thing, this apprentice–elder relationship, and the *ẹgbẹ́* that nurtures it. The student in the tribe must be beholden to the teacher. The Yoruba priest in many Western variants of the practice must daily call the names of the spiritual elders or godparents reverently. The godparent must also be remembered in acts of faith and kindness—and these acts teach the lessons of the tradition. The apprentice is tasked with moving beyond the elder while creating an individual path that can simultaneously advance and critique the traditions that have provided a foundation. In Yoruba-based practices, the stories of such breaks are filled with trauma—ungrateful godchildren, dismissive godparents—but some of these shifts seem to be the natural order of things. Separation can happen without rupture.

The clearest example of moving away from theatrical jazz aesthetics while acknowledging and incorporating the contributions of artistic elders can be found in the work of Florinda Bryant and Zell Miller III. Both Bryant and Miller have mapped their own aesthetic terrain through close work with Carlos, Jones, and Bridgforth over many years. Although distinctive in their art practice, Bryant and Miller have morphed their jazz training into Hip Hop sensibilities. Bryant's 2002 *Sister Overpass,* in collaboration with Piper Anderson and Yalini (then Marian Thambynayagam),[11] and *Half-Breed Southern Fried (check one)* directed by Carlos, reveal her fluency with simultaneity of time, place, and action, a specific movement vocabulary, and an engaged relationship with the audience/witnesses even as *Sister Overpass* was specifically developed through the structure of the cipher and *Half-Breed* included a DJ and a B-Girl who amplified the improvisation imbedded in the verbal text. Bryant refers to the theatrical jazz principles she acquired through the Austin Project as "the science of the cipher."[12] For five years, Miller produced an annual "Hip Hop Explosion" in Austin, Texas, that featured many manifestations of Hip Hop sensibilities, from B-Boys and B-Girls on roller skates to high school spoken-word collectives to his own precisely crafted solo work. Miller's *Arrhythmia,* directed as a staged reading by Jones, dramaturged by Bridgforth, and hosted by Carlos for Penumbra Theatre's Cornerstone Reading Series, was followed by *Evidence of Silence Unbroken,* with Walter Kitundu as DJ and directed by Jones, along with the establishment of the spoken-word venue Xenogia with frequent collaborator Jeffrey Da'Shade Moonbeam. Miller's dedication to Hip Hop aesthetics can also be seen in his *Windtalkers and Mythmakers,* in which he pays homage to his dear mentor whom he affectionately calls Mama Carlos. In that production, Carlos was performed by Bryant. In a different vein, scholar/poet Lisa L. Moore's work with theatrical jazz began with her participation in the Austin Project. She adapted the principles of tAP into a distinctive pedagogical strategy that she used in graduate writing seminars. At each public sharing of her students' work, Moore acknowledges her Austin Project elders and *ẹgbẹ́* even as she admittedly moved beyond those teachings. Although these seminars bear the truth-telling and ancestral exploration characteristic of the Austin Project, Moore infuses

the work with her own exercises, assignments, and discussions, which reflect her unique artistic and scholarly impulses.

There are many roots of theatrical jazz; however, three visionary institution-builders had a specific and overlapping impact on Carlos, Jones, and Bridgforth. Ellen Stewart, Aishah Rahman, and Dianne McIntyre opened the way for the theatrical jazz lineage being charted here. Each of these artists is an institution builder whose influence extended well beyond those in their immediate reach. Ellen Stewart founded La Mama E. T. C. in 1961 as an international experimental theatre company. Unfortunately, because of the often narrow ways that Black Theatre is conceived and the separatist vision of most strands of Black nationalism, Stewart was seldom acknowledged for the role she played in encouraging innovative theatrical forms for Black artists. Her commitment to the avant-garde and to European collaborations was thought of as white and therefore not within the scope of Black aesthetics. La Mama has presented over a thousand productions, including work by Amiri Baraka and Ed Bullins. In describing her work with Black artists during the 1960s, Stewart said, "One writer, who was a La Mama Playwright, got to be 'minister of culture' for the black movement. I would see him and he wouldn't speak to me, but he'd always call me up late that night and say, 'Mama, forgive me, I couldn't speak to you in front of my friend, but you're my mama.' And he wasn't the only one. It was heavy, heavy."[13] In an interview with Stewart in 2007, I asked her about this incident and her relationship to Black Theatre generally. She affirmed this story and mentioned the many Black artists who worked for La Mama, though these stories are seldom included in historical accounts of the Black Arts Movement. Stewart was invested in making art in which Black people did not have to denigrate themselves with caricatures and stereotypes.[14] Stewart's dedication to experimental forms and to an expansive Blackness make her a foremother to Carlos, Jones, and Bridgforth. Stewart's sense of *ẹgbẹ́* was a strong foundation for her artmaking. She invested in people, not in plays. She says, "If the play's a flop, I'm not bothered because I believe in that person."[15]

"LA MAMA HAS HAD A STRONG HAND IN THE ENVIRONMENT THAT IS THE AVANT GARDE OF AMERICAN THEATRE . . . IN THE 60S WHEN I MET ELLEN AT 15 SHE WAS DOING STUFF IN BARS. ELLEN WANTED A COLOR FREE SPACE TO WORK. SHE FOUND THAT SPACE ON EAST 4TH STREET WHERE ROD RODGERS AND ELEO POMARE WERE ALSO WORKING."*

—LAURIE CARLOS

* E-mail message to author, January 12, 2012.

Aishah Rahman's *Unfinished Woman Cries in No Man's Land While Bird Dies in Gilded Cage* was a groundbreaking work that, as Carlos put it, "broke open female character" by presenting complex Black women characters that theatre audiences had little opportunity to experience. Her texts are early examples of theatrical jazz in print and in production. She has theorized about and written in a jazz aesthetic, and may well be the first to use the term "jazz aesthetic" as it relates to theatre.[16] She asks, "I knew we African Americans were a jazz people who lived improvisatory lives in multirealties so why couldn't The Music be adopted as a dramatic structure? Form following content." Rahman has demonstrated what Brandi Catanese calls "a persistent devotion to the possibility of a culturally autonomous black theatre"[17] and has manifested that commitment through her plays, essays, journal editorship, memoir, and pedagogy. Her teaching at Brown University was the training ground for many in the form, including Daniel Alexander Jones, who took classes from her while he completed his M.A. in theatre history and criticism. As founder and editor of *NuMuse*, a journal of new dramatic writing and essays, she published the works of many nontraditional theatre artists affiliated with Brown including Alice Tuan, Nilo Cruz, Shay Youngblood, Daniel Alexander Jones, Michael S. Weaver, Bridget Carpenter, and Ruth Margraff.

"AISHAH RAHMAN WAS A MASTER OF CRAFT. SHE HAD INCREDIBLE RIGOR IN HER PRACTICE. THERE WASN'T A BREATH OUT OF PLACE. THE WAY I USE THE PAGE, THE WAY I THINK ABOUT SENTENCE STRUCTURE, I LEARNED THAT FROM HER FOR SURE."*

—DANIEL ALEXANDER JONES

* Phone interview with author, January 11, 2007.

Dianne McIntyre, founder of Sounds in Motion Dance Studio of Harlem, established a breath-inspired movement vocabulary in collaboration with jazz musicians that was passed on to several artists including Laurie Carlos, Marlies Yearby, Ntozake Shange, and Jawole Willa Jo Zollar. McIntyre wanted to develop what she called "Total Theatre,"[18] performance that drew upon music, dance, and text as necessary ingredients in expressing an idea or experience. McIntyre began working with musicians on stage while she was studying dance at The Ohio State University. She developed her specific movement idioms from the music and poetry that was moving through Harlem during the 1960s. Sounds in Motion became a salon where artists came to improvise, to make new work, and to hang out in each other's company. She has been a longtime collaborator with musician Olu Dara, and was one of five African diasporic women choreographers invited to perform in "Fly: Five First Ladies of Dance" at 651 Arts in 2009.[19] McIntyre's way with movement is the forerunner to the nonmimetic physicality that characterizes much of the theatrical jazz of Carlos, Jones, and Bridgforth.

In considering those artists who provide background and foundation to theatrical jazz, it is essential to include Ntozake Shange, who is chronologically positioned more as a peer to Carlos, Jones, and Bridgforth than as an elder. In the previous section, I gave an overview of the principal role Shange played in developing the theatrical jazz practices of the three artists featured here. Shange's aesthetics that seamlessly wove together dance, music, and narrative, that valorized a diverse Blackness and Black women's stories, as well as the popular and critical explosion of praise surrounding *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, suggested that U.S. audiences and society in general might be ready to recognize alternative theatre forms and voices. In the sections that follow on each artist, I offer greater detail on how Shange and her work contributed to the aesthetics of Carlos, Jones, and Bridgforth.

In the act of *ikọ́ṣẹ́*, the apprentice must discover how to critique or even challenge the elder. In Yoruba-based spiritual practices, this questioning can be construed as an unforgivable transgression. In theatrical jazz, it has the potential to disrupt the entire *ẹgbẹ́*, with members feeling compelled to take sides and mask their true feelings. In Yoruba theology, practitioners understand *ikọ́ṣẹ́* within the frame of a monarchy where the *Ọba* has the undisputed authority even when under the advisement of a council of elders. Theatrical jazz straddles the lines between

acknowledging elders and practicing the democratic principles of community decision-making. In both theatrical jazz and Yoruba practices, the ethics or *iwà* of the elder sets the tone for the work and for critique. When the individuals in an *ẹgbẹ́* are clear about their position within the *ẹgbẹ́*, and they have developed strong relationships with each other—not only with the elders—it is much easier for them to act as the checks and balances needed to keep the *ẹgbẹ́* functioning well. The *ẹgbẹ́* must work to ensure that the elder's wisdom is respected while not holding the elder above critique. The *iwà* of everyone involved is essential. Without the principles of good character and group accountability governing the work, elders can become unchallengeable dictators, unchecked in their personal excesses.

The theatrical jazz aesthetic *ẹgbẹ́* is migratory. These artists are dispersed around the United States, traveling from city to city presenting their work at a handful of willing venues. This is quite different than the regional theatre model established in the United States in the late 1940s. Since the development of Margo Jones's Theatre '47 and Nina Vance's The Alley Theatre, the regional theatre structure has dominated the U.S. theatrical landscape as the mark of professionalism and acceptance. Presenting work in a single venue, developing a season, nurturing subscribers, and hiring staff remain the hallmarks of success and stability that characterize even avant-garde companies such as La Mama E. T. C., Woolly Mammoth, the Rude Mechanicals, and Steppenwolf. As of this writing, the primary jazz aesthetic artists discussed in this book are situated on the fringe of traditional theatrical structures established through the advent of regional theatres.[20] An advantage to the minimal institutionalization of theatrical jazz is that the form has the potential for being a deeply transgressive medium as it challenges the structures of class, race, gender, sexuality, and nationhood that are ingrained in the very perpetuation of institutions.

The dispersed lives of the theatrical jazz *ẹgbẹ́* has a kinship with a Yoruba understanding of identity. *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* is the spiritual home for all Yoruba; it is the site of creation and dispersal. Indeed, the very name *Ilé-Ifẹ̀* implies not only origin but also "an expansive place/land/space."[21] Yoruba people, then, understand themselves to be a diasporic people. In his discussion of the centrality of spoken praise to Yoruba cultures, Olabiyi Yai notes that diasporic reach is a given in a Yoruba worldview. Diaspora exists as the hope for continuation, dispersal as the potential and desire for growth and expansion.

"Ilé-Ifẹ̀ ọ̀ọ̀daiyé ibi ojúmọ́ tí ń mọ́ wa."

"*Ilé-Ifẹ̀* the place of creation, where the day dawns."

OLABIYI YAI: "It is important to observe that the Yoruba have always conceived of their history as diaspora. The concept and reality of diaspora are rationalized in Yorubaland as the normal or natural order of things historical."*

* "In Praise of Metonymy," 108.

Diasporic realities not only create a circumstance of homelessness, they can also create new communities of comrades. Rather than an allegiance to a distant geographic home, a nostalgic past, a sorrow in the absence, these aesthetically determined diaspora dwellers create kin and home based on a set of artistic and life principles. They become their own root, intriguingly aware of ancestors but not bound by the ancestors' lands. They forge the bonds of *ẹgbẹ́*.

Ilé is home, what the theatrical jazz artists are creating with each other, a familiar place, free to experiment. But the jazz *ẹgbẹ́* resists the stationary singular home as they map out nomadic territories even with the focus on key cities—Austin, Minneapolis, New York. They find themselves homeless within the theatre world—on the fringe, fully embraced neither in avant-garde circles nor by the gatekeepers of Black Theatre, what *Washington Post* critic David Nicholson called the originators of the "image tribunals"; yet, there can be innovation in the margins. They are fashioning a new homeplace. Rather than settle for an identity of rootlessness by creating what I once called "a discourse of dislocation,"[22] these theatrical jazz artists are forging new nomadic transitory homes of artistic kin. They are moved more by a homeplace they could discover from region to region than by a homeland they left behind. In this way, home is not fashioned as an originary location, a longed-for "root," but the nomads make home as they, of necessity, gather to make art. It is essential that they come together again and again to map the contours of this form, to create a mutual embodied language, to solidify artistic identities, to hone understandings of how jazz in theatre lives. This is deeply collaborative work that builds on frequent continuous artistic transmunicipal journeys among those who are steeped in the tradition. They have made an intranational *ẹgbẹ́* of theatrical jazz artists trained in and committed to the specific rigors of the work.

In African Diasporic Studies, much attention has been given to geography, to trade routes, to the adaptations made in "new" locations, and to the forces of hegemony that strive to blunt particularities in new locations.[23] The theatrical jazz diaspora is more about doing and being than about identifying origins. In this way, Laurie Carlos, who makes no claims on African aesthetics, and Erik Ehn, a frequent collaborator with Jones and Carlos and a seasoned theatrical jazz artist of European descent, are both squarely positioned in a theatrical jazz aesthetic because their work and their lives are deeply informed by jazz aesthetic principles. Their work is grown from a diaspora, and they live the lives of diaspora dwellers making a homeplace in the *ilé* they forge with one another.

Diaspora as dispersal, and diaspora as shared rebellious identities, has a kinship to the Austin School of Activist Anthropology, which identifies diaspora as a political position for people who claim Blackness as a global identity.[24] This identification acknowledges similar and persistent oppressions across geography, class, gender, sexuality, nation, and is a call to dismantle those oppressions. For the Austin School, diaspora not only names the dispersal, it also lives as a term of collective resistance by claiming solidarity with people who live in other regions yet share similar racialized realities. Likewise, the dispersed theatrical jazz *ẹgbẹ́* recognizes its critique of society in general and of traditional theatre in particular. This work advocates for social reorganization because it insists on an honesty that cannot be supported in racist, sexist, homophobic, classist, nationalist structures. Because the jazz aesthetic is a way of daily life along with being a way to make art, these counterhegemonic aesthetic choices are also counterhegemonic social choices.

By focusing on Laurie Carlos, Daniel Alexander Jones, and Sharon Bridgforth, I am able to look at the central members of a theatrical jazz *ẹgbẹ́* as it developed

in the 1990s in Austin, Texas. Their childhoods reveal the many strands that combined to create the theatrical jazz impulses that now dominate their work. The power of place, *àdúgbò*, is demonstrated in the people and sites of their youth. It sculpted their political and aesthetic lives that evolved into the theatrical jazz for which they are now known. These artists have a particular understanding of *egbé* that is born of the necessity for community responsibility—a sense that was nurtured in their home landscapes. The meals they prepare, the images, the books, and the music that ground them, along with production artifacts and artistic genealogies, are keys to experiencing their particular expressions of theatrical jazz.

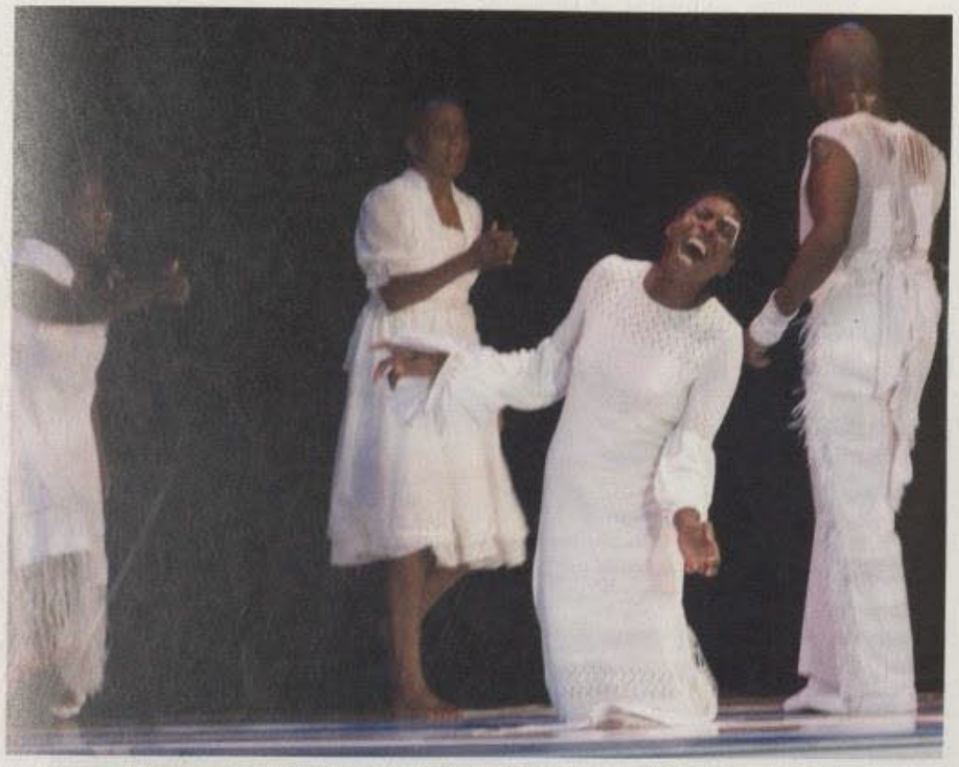

Figure 9. Helga Davis with ensemble in *blood pudding* at New York SummerStage Festival. In this 2010 performance, Davis (foreground) offers up sonic power while Francine Sheffield, Omi Osun Joni L. Jones, and Baraka de Soleil work a series of gestures. Photo by Sharon Bridgforth.