Program Narrative: Archiving Black Vernacular Dance: Deborah Mitchell’s Moon Suite
By: Kat Echevarria Richter
As a high school student, I had the honor of dancing in Deborah Mitchell’s Moon Suite, choreographed
for the New Jersey Tap Dance Ensemble and praised by dance historian Constance Valis Hill in Tap
Dancing America (2010) for its “subtly and depth.” In 2020—nearly two decades after I had left the
Ensemble to pursue a BA in dance and history and an MA in dance anthropology— NJTap celebrated its
25
th
 anniversary and Mitchell invited my company, the Philadelphia-based Lady Hoofers Tap Ensemble,
to perform. As we took our places backstage alongside guest artists including Savion Glover, Mercedes
Ellington, Tony Waag, Brenda Buffalino, and Germaine Goodson, I began to fully comprehend Mitchell’s
legacy. She created a racially integrated company, insisting that tap was an “original American art” form
that could belong to everyone (even white girls like me), and she stewarded that company for over two
and a half decades, despite tap’s marginalized status in the dance world. My proposed research project
utilizes archival, autoethnographic, oral history, and practice as research methodologies to explore
strategies of resistance to white cultural hegemony through the choreography and staging of Black
vernacular dance, specifically rhythm tap.
Due to its associations with blackface minstrelsy and popular entertainment, tap has often been
deemed incapable of serious expression. And yet the form, with its Ring Shout antecedents, is
inherently political as it renders the body a site of resistance. Many tap dancers refer to their craft as
one of communication, and many historians date the origins of tap to the Stono Rebellion of 1739 and
the subsequent ban on drums in South Carolina’s so-called slave codes. Like jazz, tap can be viewed as
American history writ large: democratic by nature in comparison to “elite” European art forms such as
ballet and classical music; and born of improvisation—a characteristic that was true of the enslaved
Africans, indentured servants, and immigrants who contributed to the form, and remains true of its
syncopated rhythms to this day. In “‘Being Savion Glover:’ Black Masculinity, Translocation, and Tap
Dance” (undated), Thomas DeFrantz draws on the work of Brenda Dixon-Gottschild to illustrate how,
“Consistent with American social constructions that have historically displaced and invisibilized their
African wellsprings, tap has been trivialized or infantilized as a vernacular form accessible to all but
without the patina of profundity allowed art.” My work as a tap dancer/practitioner, educator,
choreographer, scholar, freelance writer, and artistic director of my own tap company aims to reclaim
this profundity for tap.
I’m particularly interested in the historiography of tap, especially the denial and subsequent reassertion
of tap’s West African and African American roots through published and performative histories. I intend
to conduct archival research at the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library.
There, I will access oral history interviews with tap dancers Jeni LeGon, Mable Lee, Dianne Walker,

This archival research will augment my autoethnographic and kinesthetic research into Mitchell’s
critically-acclaimed Moon Suite, choreographed to waltz, bossa nova, and swing treatments of the jazz
standard How High the Moon arranged by Leonard Oxley. As a tap dancer, I was fortunate to train
under both Mitchell and Oxley from 1995-2003, first as a member of the Youth Ensemble and then as a
Principal Dancer. As a light-skinned, white passing, third generation Puerto Rican, my time with the
Ensemble was a transformative experience for me: one that introduced me to Black vernacular dance,
to the world of Duke Ellington, and the legacies of systemic racism in the dance world. It has taken me