Jawole Zollar's *Praise House* and the Ecstasy of the Black Church Ritual

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The Praise House was a place that people went to worship, a kind of leaderless church. It didn't have a preacher, but it was a gathering where you testified you gave witness to the energy that was created, so it was the idea of raising the energy to have this, experience together to glorify something higher than your self.
—Jawole Zollar (2001)[1]

Much has been written about the African American church "shout" and its influence upon Black performance styles and genres.[2] Professional theater works have explored the complicated cultural dynamics evoked by the ritual and ceremony of the church; gospel productions developed within the "Chitlin' Circuit" (and in other venues) acknowledge the mannerisms and interpersonal comedies that exist among the church crowd; and dramas by authors like Langston Hughes (*Tambourines to Glory*) illuminate the idiosyncrasies of religious characters. Yet only a handful of theater productions attempt to dramatize the emotional and spiritual ecstasy evoked within the ceremonial church ritual itself.

As Telia Anderson writes: "black women, through calling the spirit (also known as "getting happy," "shouting," or "stomping"), operate a radical Africanist performance strategy that accesses and enacts a personal and corporeal divine authority."[3] In other words, getting happy in church is an act of power. Jawole Zollar, in her dance theater work *Praise House*, uses the Black church as a means and mechanism for expressing spiritual ecstasy onstage. This essay is a descriptive analysis of *Praise House*, a musical theater work premiered and performed by the Urban Bush Women that uses the theatrical dance structures of church rituals to illustrate a dramatic tale while at the same time provoking transformation of the spirit. *Praise House*, based upon the real-life story of Minnie Evans, a North Carolina

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artist who lived between 1890 and 1987 had its first full production at the Spoleto Festival in 1990, and was later filmed by Julie Dash for the "Alive From Off Center" PBS series in Summer 1991. The production is a woman-centered exploration of how the Black church ritual can transform its participants.

A "Praise House," as Zollar states above is a local, colloquial African American church where members find respite from the trials and tribulations of daily life. Neighborhood folk gather in the praise house whenever work is over and the spirit is weary. During and after the era of slavery in the United States, worshipers would congregate in small churches to celebrate God with singing and dancing rituals. The ceremonies featured hand clapping, ring dances, and shouts—ecstatic moments of spiritual possession expressed through body and voice. Within the space of the praise house existed the possibility for renewal and liberation through communion with like-minded people.

> *Viola Sheely leaps from the floor as if propelled from a rocket. Her arms and legs pierce downward towards the floor as if to puncture the very air that supports her tiny lithe body. When she lands, she shakes her torso from side to side as if struggling to release herself from the confines of her own internal mania. She is possessed and angry. The physicality of her movements engages the viewer and at the same expresses the performer's grief over the theatrical death of her mentor grandmother.*[4]

Praise House tells the story of an uneducated southern woman named Hannah (played by Viola Sheely) who is obsessed with painting her religious visions. "Other worldly" spirits move the character to record her revelations on paper. The danced scene of Hannah's grief that I describe above culminates with the appearance of angels, dancers dressed in diaphanous costumes that comfort the child in her moment of distress by caressing her. These unlikely black angels represent both the spiritual and secular community of "folk" who will guide the woman into her state of acceptance. They do this through the medium of art. Minnie's hands are guided to a tablet of paper where she begins to draw the concentric circles that speak to her madness. In the play *Praise House*, these drawings are the spiritual path towards self-realization. The message that Zollar communicates is that art has a healing power, a power available to even the most unlikely of the Black community. The themes of folk, community, healing and transformation propel the story. Through the community of spiritual guides the young girl is able to survive within the confines of her rather dreary rural life.

The real-life Hannah (Minnie Evans) lived in North Carolina and received her first "vision dream" on Good Friday 1925 when "she completed two small pen-and-ink drawings . . . dominated by concentric circles and semi-circles against a

background of unidentifiable linear motifs."[5] Her designs drawn in crayons and pen depicted ancestral figures, demons, angels, and chimeras. Because the drawings sprang from spiritual sources they underscored the permeable boundaries between the spiritual and natural worlds. Minnie Evans was compelled to "draw or die," to communicate with the spirit world through her art, or else, risk losing her sanity in the earthly sphere.

The fully staged version of *Praise House* appeared at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in November 1991. It featured an elaborate set by Leni Schwendinger, text by Angelyn DeBord, music by Tiye Giraud and Carl Riley, and was co-choreographed by Jawole Zollar and Pat Hall Smith. Describing the production, Veta Goler writes: "[T]he set gives the impression of a painting in motion. Angled clotheslines filled with laundry crisscross the stage. Umbrellas of various sizes and colors stand and lie here and there around the space."[6] During the course of the play the performers used the set properties for entrances and exits. Dancers burst from umbrellas or appeared from behind the hanging laundry as mischievous "angels" waiting to play with Hannah. Their sudden appearances helped to create a sense of fantastical surprise. The moving laundry also served as a reference point for the spiritual symbols that located the action in the metaphysical sphere. In Act II the hanging patterns of the laundry were actually reshaped to imitate angel wings in flight.

Zollar's *Praise House*, like the community churches of the same name, enables emotive expression of African American cultural values. Underlying both the stage production and the film *Praise House* are three important motifs from the African American worldview: 1) communication between the world of the living and the spiritual world, 2) the presence of ancestral storytellers or guides who remind the living of the past, and 3) the use of music and dance to emote and to communicate with spirits. *Praise House* uses these African American performance metaphors to attest to the importance of spirituality in the expression of artistry. Each of the above elements converges to create a theatrical world where the younger generation, represented by the character of Hannah, is able to overcome her personal challenges through her increasing acceptance of the spirit world.

Communication between the world of the living and the spiritual world is presumed in religious texts and accomplished in African American Christian practice through the words of the preacher, words that are often underscored by communal chants, hymns, and praise songs recited by the congregation. On a personal level spirits guides (or angels in Christian theology) speak to adherents and give them insight into their lives. The central character of *Praise House* (Hannah) exists in a world in which the borders between the spirit world and the material world are always permeable. At the same time, *Praise House* reflects a West African (Yoruba) perspective of the spirit world siphoned through the African American experience. Although the images are couched in Christian iconography—crosses, angels, and

Jesus figures—the metaphysical concepts are strongly grounded in an worldview in which the relationship between spirit gods and human beings is multi-lateral; angels and other religious figures communicate with humans on a daily basis and help to ease the earth-born troubles of the worshipers.

The second component of the African American worldview, the presence of ancestral storytellers or guides, is evident in the play in a character that serves as a Griot or storyteller. The Griot, in traditional African society, is a kind of community archive. Through song and story he recites the history of a cultural community while at the same time passing on ethical or moral codes to the listeners.[7] Two familiar examples of the Griot-like personage would be the character of Gabriel in August Wilson's play *Fences*, and the similarly named character of Gabe in *No Place to be Somebody* by Charles Gordone. Both of these characters speak of incidents from the past and explain how lessons learned from times before continue to have relevance in the dramatic present. Both of these characters are slightly crazed outsiders who are able to see both the future and the past lives of the other characters in the plays. Metaphorically they connect the realities of present dramatic circumstances to the experiences of generations that have come before. In *Praise House*, the ancestral Griot is Brother Meshak, the storyteller/narrator who guides the audience into the world of the central protagonist.

Within African American church rituals, music and dance are used to connect worshipers to one another, to raise the emotions, and to punctuate moments of ecstasy. The sound and timbre of the voices create a harmonic resonance that moves through the congregation. Often the vibration of the voices become kinesthetic responses that result in physical leaps, shivers, or arm raising. A musical theater play like *Praise House* recreates the language and rhythmic patterns of the church service in both form and content. The musical themes are drawn from a repertory of rural revivalist chants and songs; while at the same time, the action of the play is advanced by musical transitions that are enhanced renditions of soul-stirring gospel music. In addition, characters use spirituals and blues songs to "shout," in the process, freeing themselves emotionally from their individual fears and frustrations. When they emote through the songs the audience is expected to feel the emotional release offered by the sung rituals. At the same time, for the performers in *Praise House*, the communal singing unites the chorus and dramatically connects their feelings to those of the central character. When Hannah shouts, the chorus of angels joins in; when the mother complains of aching feet, the angels moan along with her. Often the dancing interspersed throughout the play emerges from the bursts of frustration/pain/joy expressed by the central characters.

Something about Minnie Evans grabbed me.
These visions, and reading her words . . . she would be found
in the cemetery, in the mornings, and she would say that

the old ones would take her there, and teach her all night long, and so then she'd be up all night, with these angels working with her. I just was so struck by her that I kind of settled into the strength and the beauty of her words and I wanted to capture that.[8]

The play opens with a character named Brother Meshak, seated on a skeletal throne topped by a tattered umbrella. He represents Papa Legba, the trickster deity of the crossroads within the Yoruba pantheon. In *Praise House*, he is also a Griot who plays the guitar and moves the characters through the actions of the narrative. The first scene sets up his relationship with the other characters as he leads them in a pedestrian greeting and hand shaking sequence that resolves into the sounding of a mournful group wail.[9] By the end of the sounding, all of the players are joined in a single center-stage hand hold that reinforces their sense of community. The wail next transforms into a southern spiritual, "Bring the Spirit Child," that culturally locates the performers in the rural south. The pace of the lyrics accelerates until the characters are performing an active ring shout—dancing, singing, and stomping their feet in a repeating rhythm pattern with a percussive underscore.[10] When Brother Meshak exits, a string of laundry appears and the audience is catapulted into the domestic world of three generations of characters: the hard toiling mother, the irrepressible daughter and the matronly Grandma.

Grandma, played with great finesse by Laurie Carlos, is another spiritual guide for Hannah. As the play unfolds she becomes the young girl's confidante. Grandma is already familiar with angels and spirit beings. She has lived a life of hardships and tribulations, yet through it all, she keeps the "secrets of the ancestors in her hair." Dramatically, she serves as a buffer between Hannah and her mother. Moma (played by Terri Cousar) is preoccupied with daily domestic chores and the drudgery of survival in the rural south. Hannah's ethereal world of angels and paintings directly conflicts with her mother's earthly ambitions of washing clothes and dishes while ignoring her aches and pains. Moma constantly chides her daughter about her distressing "visions." Despite her mother's interventions, Hannah persists in communicating with her Angels, naughty uncontrollable dancers with childlike qualities who distract her and urge her to run away. The flying angels of the play represent the continuing presence of the spiritual guides in Hannah's rural southern world. These angels are like the "Flying Africans" of Gullah folklore who assist human beings in solving their earthly problems.[11] Stories like the Flying Africans acknowledge the continuation of African belief systems among African American field workers. The angels that Hannah sees help her. Through her visions of angels she can see the potential for change, both past and present.

As the narrative of the play continues, Hannah entertains herself in the yard with supposedly invisible angels who jump around and play African American ring games. These childhood dances are choreographed sequences that include

energetic leaps and awkward, gawky turns in the air. While Hannah plays, Grandma eggs her on. Speaking with poetical text, she tells the audience of her own visionary gifts:

> I don't remember sleeping at anytime
> That I have not dreamed.
> I have dreamed my whole life.
> I can't paint what I dream because
> my dreams are so beautiful.
> I paint a memorandum of my dreams.[12]

Brother Meshak and the angels listen to Grandma's revelations even as the mother chides the girl: "Hannah get in there and wash the dishes. What are you two up to?" The character of the Mother is hard-edged and weary. She grounds herself in daily domestic chores and ignores, even denies the presence of the very angels who could spiritually release her from the drudgery of her material circumstances. The mother's attitude directly contrasts with that of the Grandmother. Although Grandma gently chides Hannah for the silliness of only thinking about "Angel's toenails," she also encourages her to keep in touch with her voices. Through the interactions of these two characters, Zollar implies that African American women who do not understand spirituality as an artistic and emotional release will be unable to find solace in the material world. Hannah has visions that are able to nurture her even as she remains immersed in a struggle to cope with daily duties. The Mother's frustrations and anger could also be transformed through the angels into a joyous artistic expression. Instead, the mother remains tied to the limited horizons of what she sees and hears in her own backyard.

The next scene of *Praise House* shows the angels sitting with Hannah and painting their toenails. In the filmed version of the work the dancers literally run through the air with their "toenails barely touching the ground" as they fly and escape to beyond Hannah's reach. In some ways, these flying angels may be equated with the sylphs of the European romantic ballet. They are light and ethereal and they represent the merging of the spiritual and physical planes of existence. In the staged version, the angels are slightly more earth-bound. They sit comfortably at Grandma's feet while painting their toenails. In this communal moment of female "beautifying" they exchange coos and slaps. In general, the staged version of *Praise House* was more folksy and gut-bucket than the later version recorded on film by Julie Dash. Dash's cinematic style emphasized the dreamlike qualities of the play while de-emphasizing the gritty folklore that partially inspired the movement and initially propelled the characters through their interactions on stage. Many scenes, like the reflective blues sung by Brother Meshak and the bawdy food song sung by Laurie Carlos, were completely eliminated in the screen version.

In Summer, 1991 (before its official New York premiere) filmmaker Julie Dash recorded selected scenes from *Praise House* for the PBS Alive from Off Center documentary series. The filming took place in New Orleans, a city known for its indigenous backwoods churches. Dash is most renown for her film *Daughters of the Dust*, a tale of three generations of Black women set in the Gullah Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina. As in *Praise House*, folklore and customs infuse the setting and dialogue of *Daughters of the Dust*. The earlier film also features strong women who exist as a community outside of the mainstream of American life. In both *Praise House* and *Daughters of the Dust* the boundaries between the material world and the spiritual world are mutable. By bringing the New York City based Urban Bush Women to the south, Zollar and Dash allowed the cast to experience the revelatory religion of the Pentecostal church *in situ*. Like Zora Neale Hurston, the choreographer and her dancers journeyed to a center of Black folk life where spiritual possession, public funeral rites and rural churches still permeate the culture.

New Orleans has always been an important center for black music and dance. The dance tradition extends back to the early 1800s when newly arrived Haitian immigrants would meet in Congo Square to publicly dance and carouse.[13] Later (1860), band associations were formed as part of the mutual aid societies to support newly liberated black laborers.[14] The mutual aide societies, known as lodges, played for funerals, dances and annual parades throughout the city.[15] Funeral processions played by the New Orlean's bands inspired Zollar to develop some of the crucial scenes for *Praise House*.

A pivotal scene in both versions of *Praise House* is the death of the Grandmother. This seasoned matron sits onstage in a the throne that once held the Elegba spirit (Brother Meshak) and combs Hannah's hair as she begins to sing one of her most revealing songs, "In My Hair I Keep My Secrets."

> In my hair I keeps my secrets
> And you can comb them through
> You'll hear them crackle out of me
> And go right straight to you.
>
> This gift that you are given
> A rising star at dawn
> There is a day you'll understand
> Just where my world has gone.[16]

The song is sung as a slow ballad. Through it's verses Grandma lets Hannah know two things: that secret powers are a special gift, and the she herself is about to die—to move on and cross over to the world of the spirits, leaving Hannah to cope

with her own psychic gift. Near the end of her song she asks Hannah to fetch her purple dress and white shoes, two items that symbolize her impending journey across the river of life and into the land of the ancestors. After her song, she opens a tattered black umbrella and follows Brother Meshak offstage. Because he represents the Elegba spirit he leads her off; thus fulfilling his role of the spirit guide by standing at the crossroads between the living and the dead and controlling the fate of those on either side of the divide.

Harlem Renaissance author Zora Neale Hurston describes Elegba as the "God of the gate. He rules the gate of the hounfort, the entrance to the cemetery and he is also Baron Carefour, Lord of the Crossroads."[17] By this she means that the deity (represented by Meshak) controls the borderland between the ancestral past and the material present. Like Charon of the River Styx in Greek mythology, he assists those who are about to die with their journey to the underworld. While this concept appears at first to be outside of Christian theology, it is central to the African American cultural belief in the connection between the ancestors, the living, and the future generations. Once again, the *Praise House* characters are able to traverse the permeable boundaries between humans and spirits.

Once Brother Meshak "carries her over" the grandmother dies, but even in death she does not remain trapped beyond the reach of humans. In the original version of *Praise House* she reappears onstage almost immediately wearing her purple dress and strutting her hats and shoes in full splendor. Now she is like the leader of the second line in a New Orleans jazz funeral procession. Malone describes how these grand marshals strut and parade at the rear of the processional dressed to a "T" in white gloves.[18] Like this legendary band leader, Grandma brandishes an umbrella over her head, this one completely transformed into a frilly canopy of streamers and banners. With her is the same Brother Meshak, however he is now dressed in a too-tight three-piece suit. When she appears, the angels and dancers follow her as she moves across the proscenium to the other side of the imagined spiritual waters. Music and dance escalate until the performers and the audience becomes viscerally involved in what is clearly a southern style revival meeting. The dancers play tambourines and perform a circular dance that includes body beats and intricate hand play. In New York, the Lavendar Light chorus, a group of local gospel performers joined the scene as well.[19] Now Grandma has passed over to the other side of the river, gone on to the land of the dead with pomp and festivities.

But, like a never-ending reprise the Grandmother refuses to die. Even after the rousing revival dance that takes place at her own funeral, the Grandmother returns to the stage. Before she exits, the chorus changes the setting by stringing letters across the expansive clothesline that drapes the stage. Now the audience has been relocated to the "Everlasting Friends Mission Church" where Grandma is given yet another opportunity for a rousing finale number. This time the actors sit around makeshift tables and group themselves as if they are on a tiered pew. They

testify and proclaim their revelations to the gathered "folk" as if they are in the midst of a sanctified church service. As Anderson writes "With Black women's voices, bodies, spirits, and minds as moveable orchestrations, black women can set up "church" anywhere."[20] Now Grandma gets bawdy. She takes center stage and she sings a gut-bucket blues song full of double entendres about sex. The lyrics describe the process of making cobbler, but the performer makes it clear that more than fruit is heating up. Carlos sings:

> I put my hot stuff on the bottom
> And I covers it with the dough
> Put that thing in the oven
> And cook it . . . so slow.
> (Cook it Brother)
> bout thirty minutes you got hot cobbler
>
> You can do it with your fruit on the bottom
> You can do it with your fruit on the top
> Either way it'll tickle your tongue
> When you drop your chops.[21]

The church members are both appalled and thrilled by her antics. After all of this delay, the visionary, bawdy, mourning-over-her-own death Grandmother finally exits, leaving those left behind with the distinct impression that the afterlife may not be that bad.

By including humorous vernacular material in a play about spiritual enlightenment, Jawole complicates distinctions between the sacred and the profane. "In the Baptist church especially, the sermon, with the steady, pulsating rise of emotion to a heightened catharsis and resolution parallels sexual intercourse."[22] The church is a place of sacred revelations, but it is also a place of community interaction and sexual alliances. Grandma's sensual exploits are meant to inspire both Hannah and the Mother by helping them to appreciate and acknowledge the vibrant potency of life. Her influence extends beyond her immediate family to embrace the other community members as well. Often African Diaspora ritual ceremonies involve a public display of sexuality at the moment of death. For example, the Garifuna (Black Caribs) who reside on the Caribbean coast of Central America perform a sexualized dance that emphasizes the hips at their funeral services. The dance, called the Punta, acknowledges the importance of procreation to the continuity of the human race. As one soul dies and leaves the world, man can help new spirits to enter through procreation or sexual potency.

Act II of *Praise House* takes place decades later and is subtitled "Draw or Die." In this act, Hannah realizes, through the memory of her Grandmother, that

she is compelled to paint her visions. When the curtain raises, all of the performers are facing front singing a song called "Through the Night." Each of them uses stylized repetitive work gestures—hanging laundry, washing dishes, moving objects—as a kind of a physical mantra to mark the passage of time. Two monologues punctuate the choral work movement. Mother is complaining about Hannah's lack of ambition and about her unwillingness to work. In an evocative dance solo she uses extended hand gestures and strong, slicing arm movements to punctuate her verbal diatribe against her daughter. Hannah dances a counterpoint solo of confusion while the storyteller Brother Meshak addresses the audience.

In a casual voice, Meshak relates to the audience the story of an eagle egg dropped into a nest full of chickens. The eagle hatches and the bird finds herself a creature born different—a creature who can see farther and fly higher than all of those born around her. His story sets the scene for Hannah's revelation of her own special gift. Hannah sees the spirit of her grandmother and, after a danced fit of ecstatic release, uses her hands to paint her visions. The act ends with a church service where Hannah is metaphorically baptized into her visions underneath a twirling umbrella canopy. The final phrase spoken to Hannah by her spirit grandmother is "draw or die."

Earlier I described how music and dance in African American rituals help worshipers to connect with one another, how music raises the emotions and punctuates moments of ecstasy. In *Praise House*, because it is a theatrical work, the music does even more. Combined with the dancing it is the warp and woof that carries the performers (and presumably the audience) to new spiritual heights. The carefully constructed score composed by Carl Riley included gospel, blues, spirituals, moans, chants, and other compositions that typify the rural south. When sung as choral music the songs helped to establish mood and atmosphere. When sung as solos, the songs revealed the inner thoughts and motivations of each of the characters. Individual artists had the freedom in certain scenes to improvise around the basic melodic lines; they could add their own interpretations of rhythms and cadences. Laurie Carlos, for example, added disharmonious syncopations, moans and sounds to the melodies that referenced a more folkloric African American canon. One feature of African American field music is the close harmonies and syncopated interpretations that individual improvising artists provide. Skilled performers like Carlos used these subtle inflections to add a sense of Southern folksiness to her dramatic scenes.

The colloquial language of *Praise House* (both spoken and sung) was also important in carrying the meaning and intent of the work. Processionals, and singing carried the dramatic action in the funeral scene, but the language used by the characters to describe the process of meeting death also communicated within a distinctly African American context. Certain textual phrases and allusions were directly drawn from metaphoric African American references to spirits. The

Grandmother talks about putting on her "purple dress," and wearing a "white scarf" and "white shoes." These refer to the clothing that a person might wear in the afterlife where they will presumably join the "chorus of angels." She is "crossing the water," to join "those who have moved on," in the land of "wings." The use of metaphoric language to refer to elements of spirituality is a holdover from the nineteenth century when African Americans, in many cases, were forbidden from worshipping their traditional deities on the plantation. Field workers frequently couched discussion of the Gods in vague and referential language in order to avoid punishment. Many slaves also mixed religious references and associations as they created a new syncretistic form of worship. African Diaspora religions, like Santeria, Voodun, Candomblé, and Macumba, fused Christian imagery with Yoruba and other spiritual beliefs. Metaphoric language allowed for creative flexibility in assessing who (or which spirits) a person was referring to.

Spiritual references in *Praise House* worked on a number of levels. Jawole evoked the sense of the Southern religious meeting hall in song, dance, character development, and language. Yet the story itself, with its depiction of Hannah's internal struggle with the angels, demonstrated the relevance, the cathartic potential, of visionary experiences. Scenes with the angels, the mother, and the grandmother only underscored the clear message of "draw or die." Zollar seems to be saying that African American communities, in order to survive, must connect with the spiritual visions that motivate them, and freely express the artistry inside of their souls.

Urban Bush Women toured *Praise House* for about two years before it was retired from the company repertory. The culminating show was at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The *Praise House* film aired for a season on PBS, then little was published about the production. At its premiere the New York press cautiously praised the production with Jennifer Dunning providing the most insightful commentary. "Praise House," she writes, "is like a revivalist church service and it makes its point that visionaries are among us in the most ordinary of people. Like worshipers who, caught up in those services, begin to speak in tongues."[23] Indeed the production speaks in the people's language to express the complicated nuances of the African American church. It reinterprets the ecstatic ideals of "the shout" within a public theatrical forum, and in the process reveals how women's rage can be transformed into visionary art.

Notes

1. This is an excerpt from a March, 2001 interview with Jawole Zollar.

2. Articles or writings about performance within the African American church include: Telia Anderson, "'Calling on the Spirit': The Performativity of Black Women's Faith in the Baptist Church Spiritual Traditions and Its Radical Possibilities for Resistance," *African American Performance and*

Theater History: A Critical Reader, eds. Harry Elam, Jr., and David Krasner (New York: Oxford UP, 2001) 114-31; Jaqui Malone, *Steppin' on the Blues: The Visible Rhythms of African American Dance* (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 1996) 37-50; Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance From 1619 to Today* (Princeton: Dance Horizons, 1988) 119-30; Harold Courlander, *A Treasury of African American Folklore* (New York: Smithmark, 1996) 365-69; Sterling P. Stuckey, "Christian Conversion and the Challenge of Dance," *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, ed. Tommy De Frantz (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2002) 39-58.

3. Andersen 115.

4. This is my description of the dance choreography performed by Viola Sheeley.

5. Regina Perry, *Free Within Ourselves: African American Artists in the Collection of the National Museum of American Art* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992) 70.

6. Veta Goler, "Dancing Herself: Choreography, Autobiography, and the Expression of the Black Woman Self in the Work of Dianne McIntyre, Blondell Cummings, and Jawole Willa Jo Zolar," diss., U of Michigan, 1994, 193.

7. Oscar Brockett, ed. *History of the Theater*, 9th ed. (New York: Allyn and Bacon, 2003) 581.

8. Zollar interview 2001.

9. By sounding, I refer to the performer's use of the voice like an instrument. The performers allow sound to reverberate their bodies and voices as if they were a jazz instrument and they respond to the pitches and harmonies of one another in an improvised way.

10. The "Ring Shout" is an African American dance style that was performed in rural churches. Dancers form a circle and slide and drag their feet while rhythmically clapping their hands. Songs and chants help to set the pacing of the circle. There are moments of individual expression or improvisation within the circle, often shouts of joy or pain. For further information about the Ring Shout, see Emery 92-93 and Malone 41-45.

11. Courlander 285-86.

12. Angela DeBord, *Praise House* script. December 7, 1990.

13. Emery 154-78.

14. John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994) 158.

15. Malone 180.

16. *Praise House* script.

17. Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990) 128.

18. 181-83.

19. As part of her community engagement mission, Jawole Zollar likes to include local choirs or dance groups in staged productions whenever possible. Their presence adds to the texture and depth of the onstage play.

20. Andersen 115.

21. *Praise House* script.

22. Anderson 121

23. Jennifer Dunning, "Choreography Practiced as Anthropology," *New York Times* 5 June 1990, Late ed.: C13.