

When the Past Dances into the Future: An Interview with African-Centered Dance Scholar, Dr. Kariamum Welsh

by

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I was first introduced to Dr. Kariamum Welsh when I was a doctoral student in African American Studies at Temple University in the fall of 2004. As a formally trained dancer, it was a natural fit for me to enroll in an African Dance class as part of my doctoral degree program. The most interesting detail about the first time I met Dr. Kariamum was that it was not supposed to happen. In fact, another instructor was originally assigned to teach the section of African Dance I was enrolled in. Only later did I learn that Dr. Kariamum agreed to teach this class just a few days before our first class meeting. I truly believe this was divine order by God and the ancestors to not only ensure that our paths crossed, but to set the stage for our interaction to continue years later.

Dr. Kariamum's class was one of the best moments in my life and is something that continues to have a profound effect on me today. In addition to having the opportunity to just be in Dr. Kariamum's presence and to learn the Umfundalai dance technique; this is where Katherine Dunham metaphorically found me. Although she was still alive at this time and did not make her transition until two years later; Dunham's spirit and the spirit of many other African/Black dancers were always present in our class when we danced. It was the presence of Dunham's spirit that motivated me to learn more about her life and to begin to uncover her many contributions to Black Studies. However, it was Dr. Kariamum who motivated me to bring dance back into my life after taking a few years off, and is one of the many reasons I continue to dance today. I am just one of the many individuals and communities who have been profoundly influenced and affected by this phenomenal, African-centered woman.

Dr. Kariamtu Welsh (kariamtu@temple.edu) is a world renowned dancer, choreographer, company director, scholar, writer, activist, and Professor. Having earned her M.A. in Humanities and Choreography from the State University of New York at Buffalo and her Doctorate of Arts in Dance History from New York University; she is currently a Professor and former Chair of the Department of Dance in the Boyer College of Music and Dance at Temple University in Philadelphia, PA. As a Professor, she has taught countless courses in both Dance and Black Studies, and has supervised Dissertations, Master's of Fine Arts Thesis Concerts, Education Master's Thesis, and served on Dissertation committees not only in the U.S., but also in Jamaica.

As a scholar, she has published numerous articles in journals on Dance and Black Studies including The Griot; The Zora Neale Hurston Journal; Talking Drum: The Black Dance Journal; Sage: The Scholarly Journal on Black Women; International Journal of African Dance; Journal of Physical Education Health, Recreation, and Dance; Dance Research Journal; and Journal of Black Studies. She has also written poetry, essays, and short stories that have been published in Black World; Buffalo After Dark Magazine; Essence Magazine; Obsidian Literary Magazine; and Journal of Black Studies. Dr. Kariamtu has co-authored two books entitled African Culture: The Rhythms of Unity (Greenwood Press, 1985) and The African Aesthetic: Keeper of the Traditions (Greenwood Press, 1993), and has written several other books such as Textured Women, Cowrie Shells and Beetle Sticks (Amulefi Publishing, 1979); Guide to African and African American Art: Manual on African Art (Museum of African and African-American Art and Antiquities, 1980); African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry (Africa World Press, 1996); Zimbabwe Dance: Ancestral Voices, Rhythmic Forces, An Aesthetic Analysis (Africa World Press, 2000); The Umfundalai Dance Technique: The Shape of Rhythm (Africa World Press, 2003); and African Dance: An Introduction (Chelsea House Publishers, 2004).

Dr. Kariamtu has held several esteemed positions such as Fulbright Specialist; Guggenheim Fellow; Pew Fellow in the Arts; Director and Choreographer of the Kariamtu and Company; Founder and Artistic Director of the National Dance Company of Zimbabwe; Co-Director of the Center for Positive Thought; and Artistic Director and Resident Choreographer for the Center for Positive Thought. She is currently the Director of the Institute for African Dance Research and Performance at Temple University. As a choreographer, Dr. Kariamtu has choreographed over 100 works over the span of her extensive career. Some of these include Bookends (2011); The Clotheslines Muse (2009); Antebellum Blues (2008); The Double Dutch Chronicles (2007); Taking Flight (2006); Sankofa-Ja! (2004); Ode to Nina (2004); Akwabaa (2003); Unauthorized Autobiography (2003); River Blessings (2002); Havana Mood (2000); The Ring Shout Suite (1997); The Upper Room (1996); Nubian Caravan (1993); A Dance for Pearl (1992); and Women Gather (1991). However, what Dr. Kariamtu is most well known for is creating the Pan African dance technique, Umfundalai.

Dr. Kariamuu has also received awards such as “The Dance Scholar Award” from the Dance Department and the Office of Multicultural Affairs at Salisbury State University in Maryland; “The Purpose Award” for her contributions to Performing Arts by Dan4Nia; and the “Award of Excellence” from Norfolk State University and the 26th Annual Black College Dance Exchange. With her extensive dance experience throughout the Diaspora and her long career in academia in disciplines such as Dance and Black Studies, Dr. Kariamuu is a perfect choice to discuss the myriad of issues surrounding the relationship, inclusion, and future of African/Black Dance in Black Studies. The questions for this interview were constructed by Aimee Glocke on June 20, 2011 and answered by Kariamuu Welsh on August 17, 2011.

Aimee Glocke (AG): Do you remember the first time you danced? When was it and what occurred? What attracted you and your spirit to African/Black Dance? What were some of your first exposures and/or experiences? What is your training (formally and/or informally) in dance, in general, and in African/Black Dance, more specifically?

Kariamuu Welsh (KW): I remember dancing when I was twelve years old in my best friend’s living room and basically miming some movements to a popular song from that period. It stays in my memory because, although it wasn’t officially the beginning of my dance career, it was an indication of my interest in dance. My dance training began at Franklin K. Lane High School in Brooklyn NY in 1964. The school had a modern dance class and the teacher was Ida Waranoff. She was a former member of the Martha Graham Company and so the class was actually quite good. You had to audition for the class and it was a substitute for gym class. Getting in the class was one thing but being selected to perform a dance was quite another thing. I loved dancing but I wasn’t selected to be in any of the dances. I approached Ms. Waranoff and asked her why I wasn’t in any of the dances? Her answer to me would set me on a journey that I continue to travel. She said “If you really want to ensure that you are in a dance, you should choreograph the dance yourself and put yourself in the dance!” The modern dance class and club was a beginning point for me even though at fifteen, I was considered old to begin dance training. My mother raised me and we were very poor. I could not afford studio classes but I was fortunate to be exposed to dance through many free dance performances offered throughout the city and through some of the performance venues like the Brooklyn Academy of Music. When I was sixteen, I joined the Ron Davis Jazz Dance Company. This was a wonderful experience for me as this was a company that toured historically black colleges in the south as well as rehearsed and performed in Manhattan. I was born in North Carolina but I was raised in NY so touring the South in the mid sixties was an eye opener for me as the Civil Rights Movement was in full bloom and many vestiges of the segregated South were very much in place.

I attended classes at Clark Center for the Performing Arts (no longer in existence) and probably one of the most pivotal moment for me was meeting Pearl Reynolds. Pearl Reynolds was a second generation Katherine Dunham dancer. She was teaching at the Dance Theater of Harlem at the time and I was there to pick up my younger sister who was taking classes. I was a little early so I sat down to watch the class. Pearl was this extraordinary presence who exuded carriage, pride, elegance and technical skill. It was awe inspiring to watch her teach. She was also quite stern and the students according to my sister feared her. For me, it was love at first sight. Here was this deep cocoa complexioned woman with her hair pulled back who moved with such grace and power that I had to control myself from fawning all over her. Fortunately she grew to love me and she became my teacher and mentor for the next fifteen years. I always give thanks and praise to Pearl because she planted so many seeds in my being and many of them took root. She was an extraordinary Dunham teacher and I studied Dunham with her intensely. My development on the Umfundalai technique definitely stands on the shoulders of the Katherine Dunham technique.

My formal training in what one would call black dance at the time was in the Dunham technique with Pearl Reynolds, African dance with Olatunji, Chuck Davis, Pearl Primus and Charles Moore and jazz dance with Ron Davis. I attended a myriad of master classes and single classes.

AG: How do you define Dance? How do you define African/Black Dance?

KW: It is difficult for me to define black dance. Not because I don't embrace and recognize the term, but it is an evolving term that has taken on different meanings and nuances for me throughout my forty year career in dance. For me, it is a case of: you know it when you see it. That is too simplistic and I know full well the historical and current debates on what constitutes black dance. I can tell you what black dance isn't. It is not black dancers dancing. It is not necessarily content that pertains to the history, mythology or narrative of black people. Black dance is an extremely broad category but it is a term borne out of the struggles and challenges of dancers of color in this country. Looking at the term from the vantage point of 2011, it is more inclusive than it was when the term was being discussed in the early seventies. Black dance is a political term that created an artistic forum for black artists that could not find a space in the larger dance world. It remains a necessity. I call my work contemporary African dance but that is an evolution and I embrace the term Black Dance with all of the attendant caveats that are demanded in this increasingly globalized society. Black dance in America is different than black dance in the UK where some Asians are called Black. Black dance in Australia is different from Black dance in America so we have to be careful that we are not excluding traditions that have a unique and different history than African Americans. Historically African dance began on the ships that held enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage.

When the enslaved Africans were brought up from the bowels of the ship to exercise, they drew from their ethnic heritages so that there was a mixture of rhythms and movements that would not have existed prior to enslavement. This mixing and synthesis continued on the plantations along with inclusion of movements that the enslaved Africans observed from watching the dances of the overseers and masters.

AG: Did racism, white supremacy, racism, prejudice, and/or discrimination ever play a role in your life as a dancer? If so, how?

KW: Racism is always and has been an ever-present reality for me in the dance world. The dance world in general prides itself on being open minded but that is not always the case. The whole discussion about black dance harkens to racist practices where African American dancers could not find work in ballet or modern dance companies during a significant portion of the twentieth century. Racism rears its head in another way in terms of my work. African dance often conjures up a particular image for many people. It is sometimes seen as a frenetic, loosely structured or over structured, fun loving genre. African dance can exhibit all or some of those aspects but it is so much more than that. African dance is incredibly complex and of course you have to indicate what country, ethnic group, region, culture and time period you are referring to. I posit that there are thousands if not more African dance techniques and the resistance to the idea that African dance can be technical many times is racist. As I say later on in this interview, the Katherine Dunham technique introduced me to the idea that Blacks could have a dance technique. Now I understand that there are more techniques that are in existence than anyone could learn in a lifetime. If we understand that “technique” means a means and mode of learning, then it is clear that there are many African and Diasporan dance techniques. Many of the techniques haven’t been codified or documented in written form but they exist.

Racism has reared its head in excluding blacks from companies, by an hierarchical ranking of genres (African dance is usually at the bottom or near the bottom), by its exclusion in university offerings and by standardizing body types that make it more difficult for dancers of color to perform in professional companies.

The same modern dance teacher at Franklin K. Lane that told me to make up my own dances if I wanted to dance also told me that I had an “animal energy”. I didn’t quite know what to make of that comment but I knew that it wasn’t good. That “energy” that she observed is a very important part of the African aesthetic and it has served me well.

AG: Please briefly discuss the dance technique you originated: Umfundalai. How do you define it? What was your motivation for creating this technique? What makes this dance technique unique and different from other African/Black Dance techniques already created?

KW: I created the Umfundalai dance technique as a contemporary African dance technique in 1970. Umfundalai means “essence” or “essential” in Kiswahili. As a Pan African dance technique, the Umfundalai technique draws upon key movements from different ethnic groups and many nations in Africa, along with the movements of black cultures in the United States, Caribbean and South America. The technique is predicated on the premise that there are common aesthetic elements in African dances regardless of the region of the world that the movement comes from. Selected movements were isolated and organized and form the core of the Umfundalai dance technique. As a technique, Umfundalai strives to teach students the neo-traditional dances of Africa and the Diaspora. All universalities have their particulars and the Umfundalai technique is no different. The particulars of the Umfundalai technique lie in its application and viability in its ability to prepare dancers and choreographers for creative research using movement vocabulary from African and African Diaspora dances.

The Umfundalai technique is a codified dance technique that speaks to the African and African American aesthetic sensibilities and sensitivities. The Umfundalai technique as a contemporary dance technique draws on movements and dances from traditional dances to create a movement vocabulary that articulates the body and primes the dancer for particular expressive modes. The Umfundalai dance technique follows in the path of the Katherine Dunham dance technique and the Pearl Primus dance technique in that it addresses the corpus of dance traditions found in Africa and the Diaspora in a creative way. Specific and particular terminology and progressions is key to the understanding and execution of the technique. All dance traditions have techniques and African dance traditions are no different. The mystique and “baggage” of the word technique has discouraged the use of the word technique in discussing African dance. It is fairly recent with the exception of the Katherine Dunham technique that dancers, choreographers and teachers have become comfortable with the idea of extracting and formulating techniques based on individual perspectives while remaining linked to a specific worldview. Coming up as a young dancer in the late sixties and early seventies I only associated dance techniques with white choreographers and ballet. It wasn't until I met my teacher, Pearl Reynolds a former member of the Katherine Dunham Company that I became aware of the Katherine Dunham technique. Studying the Katherine Dunham technique was life changing for me in many respects but most importantly it empowered me to be bold, daring and self-actualizing as I took on this lifelong journey of developing the Umfundalai dance technique.

I wanted to be informed by tradition but I did not want to be responsible for upholding ancient “traditions. The Umfundalai technique draws upon selected movements from different ethnic groups and many nations in Africa, along with the movements of African cultures in the United States, Caribbean and South America. The Umfundalai serves in the way that many technique functions in that it is designed to serve choreography and creative expression.

All universalities have their particulars and the Umfundalai technique is no different. The particulars of the Umfundalai technique lie in its application and viability with regards to its ability to prepare dancers and choreographers for creative research mining and employing movement vocabulary from African and African Diaspora dances.

The Umfundalai technique is codified as much as a fluid and open-ended technique can be. The Umfundalai technique is a contemporary dance technique and draws on movements and dances from traditional dances to create a movement vocabulary that articulates the body and primes the dancer for particular expressive modes.

The very idea of a technique stirs up discussions, dialogues and debates that center on the need, aesthetic and power of techniques. Throw Africa in the mix and the discussions dance around issues of authenticity and “Westernization”. While I respect and learn from these discussions, I maintain that the Umfundalai technique is a tradition within a tradition drawing upon many traditions.

There are core movements in the technique that indicate some of the aesthetic aspects of the technique such as hot-foot, perpetual motion, polycentrism, infused spirituality and textured dimensionality. Terms that are central to the understanding of the technique such as Dobale and Gaba D’aya which are rituals that promote respect for the teacher, drummers and students.

AG: When did you start your own dance company? What style/styles of dance are usually performed? What is the company’s mission, purpose, function, etc.? As the founding Artistic Director for the National Dance Company of Zimbabwe, what are your experiences with African/Black Dance outside of the United States in Africa, the Caribbean, etc.? Do you believe there is a connection of African and Caribbean Dances to Black Dance in America? If so, what is the connection?

KW: I have worked in the contemporary African dance field for over forty years and I remain committed to differentiating contemporary African dance from neo-traditional African dance forms. My artistry draws from the calabash of African Diasporan movement and aesthetics. This deliberate choice allows me the greatest amount of freedom to create and work even as I maintain and honor the traditions on whose shoulders I stand. Myths, oral narratives, legends, & literature are all material for me as are sounds, My rites of passages, formalized or not were images of my mother singing in her bra and half slip in the sticky humid August evenings in NYC as she ironed, washed or cooked and the memory of jumping Double Dutch as a young girl until it was so dark that I couldn’t see the rope and reluctantly had to come in for the night. Village moments and rural traditions rendered in movements are mixed with the rhythms and chants of urban Zimbabwean, Ghanaian, and Senegalese life. Utterances, gesticulations, pauses, stillness and akimbo arms all find their way into my work.

There isn't enough time to do it all! I collect and mime movement vocabulary in order to reconceptualize the movement and then to shape it on the dancer with the expectation that they will then "wear" the movement bringing yet another dimension to it. A voice, image or illusion will grace my mind and off I go towards a work realized in a moment but often stored and not actualized for years.

My work has gone through three major transitions, which overlap each other. Initially, I used the techniques that I had been trained in to choreograph with interjections from my urban aesthetic. They were Jazz and Dunham dance techniques. The late 1960's and early 1970's was a period that demanded much from artists and I was no exception. The times cried out to me "who are you?" "Where do you come from?" and "how are you telling your stories?" This period led to the creation of the Umfundalai technique. Umfundalai means "essential" or "essence" in Kiswahili. The Umfundalai technique has evolved and morphed over the years and it continues to do so. It is an open-ended technique with generous input that is often improvisational. The technique is codified and taught across the globe. The technique has allowed me to ground my choreography in African movement vocabularies using my voice and perspective. The third evolution was my trips to Africa and the demystification and de romanticism of Africa, which was a positive experience. I lived in Zimbabwe for two years and was the founding artistic director of the National Dance Company of Zimbabwe. It concretized the path that I was on. I continue to tell stories, flesh out legends and revitalize myths but as I grow so does the work. Witnessing the aesthetic power, beauty and traditions of dance in Africa inspired me and taught me that my journey would be to drink from the gourd but not to replicate the gourd.

AG: Are there any African/Black dancers from the past whom you deeply respect and believe you are following in their footsteps and lineage? Are there any African/Black dancers in the present whom you also respect and believe are moving this body of knowledge forward in a positive way?

KW: Recently I have worked in Jamaica and was thrilled to see the Jamaican dances that exhibit so many African aesthetic retentions. Jamaica is a rich repository of African music and dance as are many of the other Caribbean islands. Dances like the Kumina, Dinkimini and Gerrahbente all have significant connections to the African aesthetic. I admire the body of work by the late Sir Rex Nettleford who merged the traditional with the contemporary and shared the beauty and power of Jamaican dance with the world. His work has certainly had an impact on my work and I hold him in the highest esteem, as he was a choreographer, educator, writer and historian. Sometimes you have to wear several hats in order to get your creative work done. He was always an artist but he answered the call to serve his country in other ways as well. I love the Ghanaian choreographer Nii Yartey's work. He has the ability to create contemporary African dances that are completely African.

He choreographs epics and grand works on such a scale that he takes great risks but he is able to succeed in a heart rendering way. I love Ron Brown's work. He choreographs in a contemporary African mode. I also love Charles Anderson's work. He may call his work Afro-Modern but it works beautifully and powerfully. Kemal Nance is another choreographer whose work I like. He has his pulse on social commentary in a humorous yet profound way. I pay homage to Rennie Harris for his work in Hip-Hop and Jawole Zollar for her groundbreaking choreography. I like what I see in some of the younger female choreographers that are out there like Camille Brown, Nia Love and Tania Isaac.

AG: What motivated you to dedicate your life to the development and advancement of African/Black Dance?

KW: I am a child of the sixties and early seventies. The Black Arts Movement and the Women's Movement influenced me. Although I loved dance, it was not something that I thought that I could make a career out of. I attended the University of Buffalo and received my BA degree in English. My initial goal was to teach English so that I could support myself. It was during my study and time that things fell into place and I began teaching dance. It was certainly a calling and I encourage students today to follow their passion, as it is possible to support yourself as an artist. It is not easy but it is possible. Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus was influential in that they were intellectuals and they both wrote about the dance. I include Rex Nettleford in that group as well so that I knew that I had to write about the dance in order to advance and expose African dance to more people. It is important that people see the dance but it is just as important for scholars, students and artists to be able to read about the dance. The dance was there, the times beckoned and I was blessed to follow in the footsteps of those who have gone before me. It is an honor and the field has expanded and flourished in ways that I could not envision when I first started out. I have grown with the times and although I am rooted in contemporary African dance expressive modes, there is room in my world for all kinds of dance expressions. I shy away from words like authentic and native.

AG: How do you define Black Studies (Africana Studies, Africology, etc.)? What are your experiences in the discipline of Black Studies? Having taught in both Black Studies departments and Dance departments, do you see yourself as a Dance Scholar, Black Studies' Scholar, both, or something else? In your opinion, where do you believe African/Black Dance belongs in the academy? In a Dance department? In a Black Studies' department? Both? Why? Why do you think African/Black Dance is not often included, emphasized, and/or discussed as a body of knowledge within the discipline of Black Studies? Do you think it should be? Why or why not?

KW: Dance facilitated all phenomena in traditional Africa and it continues to play a significant part in rituals and ceremonies. Academic departments that are committed to the study of black people have an obligation to include dance as part of their curriculum. I taught dance in African American Studies at the University of Buffalo and Temple University.

Ferne Caulker, a dance professor at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and artistic director of the dance company Kho-Thi has forged a strong relationship with the African American Studies department. The University of Texas at Austin's Black Studies Department is doing some innovative work with dance. I am sure that there are others but African dance needs to be offered in departments as a studio course and a lecture course. Students need to understand the African aesthetic and the centrality of dance in the lives of African, Caribbean and Diasporan people. Hip-Hop culture has to be linked to the African aesthetic and dance so that it can be studied with the proper historical context.

I am an artist who is also a scholar. African American Studies has been a foundation for me as it has allowed me to study dance from an African-centered perspective and the discipline has informed and supported my work. My experiences in African American studies have been life changing and although I don't teach in the discipline right now, I will always consider myself to be part of the discipline. Dance is not an easy genre for the academy to embrace. It has particular needs and requirements that many institutions cannot afford to build or maintain. In order for African American studies departments to offer dance classes, they have to forge relationships with the dance department in their university so that they can use the studios and theater. Courses can be cross-listed benefiting both the African American Studies and dance departments. I think that departments of African American Studies have to be more holistic and offer these courses despite the challenges that offering the classes may hold. The Umfundalai dance technique owes a tremendous debt to the Department of African American Studies at Temple University. There shouldn't be an interruption in the flow of offering these courses. There are quite a few young scholars/artists who are ready and qualified to teach dance in the academy and will help to teach the next few generation of students African Dance movement classes and history and aesthetic classes. Dance is still regarded in the minds of some of our scholars as recreational or frivolous. Dance uses the body as its template and for some scholars; there is confusion and ambivalence about the use of the body as text. If the African aesthetic is understood and appreciated then the body would be celebrated, examined and expressed in its fullness, power and beauty. The arts in African American studies need to be given more attention. Music is often found in the curriculum and visual art trails behind music but dance is still a rare commodity in the curricula of African American Studies.

AG: In your opinion, what is the future of African/Black Dance? What direction do you see it moving in the future?

The future of Black Dance is promising as the legacies of Asadata Dafora, Katherine Dunham, Keita Fordeba, Pearl Primus, Mawere Opoku and Rex Nettleford are embedded in the bodies, minds and hearts of thousands of artists, scholars, students, choreographers, and teachers. Their work has provides a foundation that continues to be built on and will continue for centuries to come.

The task ahead involves more documentation of the indigenous dances of black people around the world before they are lost. In addition, writing needs to be the mantra of the next several decades until writing becomes a habit. The writing can take many different forms but words need to be put down about the dance experience as it relates to black people. Blogs, historical accounts, memoirs, essays, articles are all mediums that artists and scholars can use to express their thoughts about dance.

Black Dance will take many directions. As a genre, it will continue to self reflect and redefine itself but it will remain a artistic and creative force for many of us. Black Dance is ancient and it has many stories to tell. These stories will take the form of narratives, abstract works, improvisations, neo-traditional dances, slamming, jamming and other forms that have yet to be imagined. The beauty of Black Dance is that it is a place where new and innovative movements are born. Those creative sparks influence many people and every once in a while they actually inspire a revolution.

AG: What is the future of African/Black Dance as a body of knowledge in Black Studies? Do you have words of wisdom for present and future scholars/practitioners of African/Black Dance in the discipline?

KW: Despite the difficult times that we are in, Black Studies has to commit faculty lines to dance. The scholars and artists are out there. It only takes a few visionary leaders to take the lead and hire dance scholars/artists. If it is on every department's ten-year plan, we would benefit from the research and artistry that these scholars/artists would bring to the departments. In addition, we must add an arts division to the usual social sciences and humanities tracks that we have in Black Studies. The presence of an Arts track insures that visual arts, music, theatre and dance have a prominent voice in the Black Studies discipline.

Let us view ourselves as one and not truncate the mind from the body. The integration of the body and mind is necessary to achieve balance and to maximize our energies to their fullest. Africa has already provided the lesson that the body is whole and we must embrace the idea of oneness so that the divide between artists and intellectuals disappears. Many of our artists are our greatest intellectuals and vice versa. We mustn't fear the powerful engine that is our mind. The training of the mind should be given the same effort as the training of the body. In tandem, it becomes a holistic enterprise and therefore more powerful and effective. Philosophies and theories emanate from artists and we should look to them for wisdom and direction. We artists should be at the "thinking" table of Black Studies to provide input, insight and knowledge. The absence of artists contributes to an incomplete knowledge base and the discipline suffers as a result.

Black Studies have been significant in my life and development as an artist. The space that I carved out should be a space that other artists can access and hone their creative spirit. Dance will make Black Studies programs stronger and it will help to bring many of the programs balance and cultural integrity.

AG: What are your plans for the future in terms of your company, research, teaching, and/or any other upcoming projects/events?

KW: Each day, I am encouraged to write, create and share my knowledge with students. Kariam & Company continues to perform and I plan to tour around the country with a few dancers to expose the Umfundalai technique to more people. My future is full as many of my students, dancers and artists fan out throughout the world to actualize their dreams and work. I am part of them and they are part of me. La Baker, a work about Josephine Baker that I collaborated on with Kimmika Williams-Witherspoon debuted last April and we are looking to present it again. I am working on a piece called “The Fattening House” which is about a Nigerian tradition of fattening young women to prepare them for marriage. It doesn’t replicate the ceremony but it is a commentary on the image of the female body. I am collaborating with the Jazz singer Nneena Freelon and that is exciting. I prefer to use live music and accompaniment when I can. As long as the ancestors continue to bless me with life and breath, I will continue to create. The African American artist has to dare to be. Time is precious and one cannot wait for someone to commission, hire, ask or request a work. The work should be ongoing and the rest will come. Daring to be is a position that one has to take throughout life. It is no apologetic and it comes out the belief that you are called to do what you do. I have dared to be and in that process, I have created a body of work that will live after me and I have helped to create my history, heritage and aesthetic lineage. Dance is part of our “keeper of the traditions” and whether it is social, ritual, ceremonial or concert dance, it has moved alongside every major event in the history of Africans and Diasporan Africans.

Dance gives me that same feeling as jumping rope did when I was a young girl. It gives me a power and exhilaration that is extraordinary. Choreography expanded that voice and feeling and opened up a well that has never run dry. With dance, I am unafraid. Choreography emboldens me and I am fierce. I remain fierce even as life’s lessons and experiences have mellowed, tempered and humbled me. The vocabulary with which I speak is contemporary with echoes of the ancient, the traditional and the past. Africa is inside me, her aesthetics support me and I boldly interpret her traditions from my circle in America. That is the luxury that I have given myself. As an artist, I don’t adhere to any tradition. For me that would be too limiting but I respect and honor all of her traditions. Even as I stretch, adapt, change and fuse the traditions, I salute those glorious, awesome and incredible traditions.

AG: Thank you so much, Dr. Kariam!