

# Dancin' on the Shoulders of Our Ancestors: An Introduction

by

Guest Editors

Aimee Glocke, Ph.D.

African American and Diaspora Studies, University of Wyoming  
and

Lawrence M. Jackson, M.F.A.

Theatre and Dance, University of Wyoming

*Aimee Glocke* (aglocke@uwyo.edu) is the Visiting Assistant Professor in African American and Diaspora Studies at the University of Wyoming. Aimee earned her M.A. in Afro-American Studies from UCLA and her Ph.D. in African American Studies from Temple University. As a dancer trained in ballet, tap, jazz, hip-hop, pointe, modern, and African dance, Dr. Glocke has studied at Edge Studio in Los Angeles; Koresh Dance Center in Philadelphia; Broadway Dance Center in New York City; and Alonzo King's Lines Dance Center in San Francisco. She is currently a member of the Neo-Classical Ballet Company, Ballet 7220, in Laramie, Wyoming. As a scholar, her research interests include African/Black Culture; the African Worldview; African/Black Aesthetics; the Black Arts Movement; the Discipline of Black Studies; the African/Black novel; Richard Wright; Katherine Dunham; Black Nationalism; Black Social and Political Thought; and African/Black Dance (jazz, tap, hip-hop, etc.). She has published in the *Encyclopedia of Black Studies*, and has upcoming articles in *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, *Generation X in the Academy*, and *Notes and Records: An International Journal of African & African Diaspora Studies*.

*Lawrence M. Jackson* (ljacks23@uwyo.edu) is an Assistant Professor of Dance at the University of Wyoming, where he teaches all levels of modern, jazz, repertory, partnering and composition. Lawrence received a BFA in Dance from the University of Southern Mississippi and an MFA in Dance from Florida State University. Professionally, he devoted several years as a principal dancer with the internationally known modern dance company, Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble. He has also performed as a guest artist in a variety of venues; on the concert stage, PBS television programs, dinner theatres, and summer dance intensives. In addition, he has also choreographed over 75 original works for the concert stage. As an instructor, he has taught and continues to guest teach and choreograph at various universities, academies and summer workshops throughout the U.S. and abroad. His professional training background in ballet, modern, jazz, and African are reflected in his choreography and classes. Most recently, Lawrence created a course entitled, "African American Dance Studies," a course designed to significantly advance the study of pioneering Black dancers by providing biographical and historical information on artists who worked to legitimize Black Dance as an art form.

Since the beginning of civilization, African dance, coupled with African music, has played a significant role in the daily lives of African people throughout the continent of Africa. In fact, African dance is so important to the everyday lives of African people that dance is incorporated into virtually every ritual, ceremony, funeral, baptism, rites of passage, and collective gathering found across the continent. As African people began to explore various geographic areas outside of the continent and were later forcibly brought against their will to places such as America during enslavement, they were obviously unable to bring much (in the case of exploration) or any (in the case of enslavement) physical property with them. Instead, what they were able to bring with them was the music in their heart and the movement in their soul. Yet, when these African dances were brought to different geographic areas outside of Africa, they underwent a period of transformation and adjustment in order to fit into their new surroundings. Regardless of how these dances have changed on the surface, their foundation (i.e. their purpose, their function, and their movement base) still links Black Dance in places like America directly back to African dance on the continent. In order to see evidence of this, all one has to do is examine present day formal dance genres and styles such as jazz, tap (specifically rhythm tap), modern, hip-hop, and even ballet to see how the dances of Africa still exist in the movement of Black people today. Dancing is also present in various informal settings found in the Black community including block parties, birthday parties, family reunions, graduations, baptisms, funerals or home going ceremonies, and church sermons. All of these examples illustrate how dance is just as important to Black life today as it is in African life past and present.

Understanding the importance of dance to the daily lives of African/Black people throughout the Diaspora forces Black Studies' scholars to ask one important question: If Black Studies (Africana Studies, Africology, etc.) is the examination, analysis, and investigation of African life, history, and culture using the African worldview as the primary lens for examination, then why does African/Black Dance not play a more central role in the discipline today? In fact, Black Studies was birthed into the academy during the Black Power Movement and the Black Arts Movement making it very easy to understand why African/Black Dance was included during the discipline's inception at places such as San Francisco State University and UC Berkeley with Sun Ra, Ellendar Barnes, Wisteria (Judith Holten), and Raymond Sawyer.<sup>1</sup> So, why is African/Black Dance virtually nonexistent in Black Studies today?

Currently, African/Black Dance as a body of knowledge is one of the least developed areas in the discipline. Consequently, few Black Studies' textbooks used to teach courses such as Introduction to African American Studies include African/Black Dance, either generally or specifically. Only a handful of Black Studies' departments offer African/Black dance classes, and even fewer require it as part of their degree program. Presentations on African/Black Dance at Black Studies' conferences are unfortunately rare. Yes, Black Studies' journals will publish individual articles on African/Black Dance, but they are quite sporadic and not much of a priority. Therefore, in order to further develop this body of knowledge, and simultaneously move the discipline of Black Studies forward, the co-editors felt that it was imperative for an entire special edition be dedicated to discussing African/Black Dance.

To our knowledge, there has only been one other Black Studies' journal that has dedicated an entire edition (special or regular) to exploring African/Black Dance. In 1983, the Caribbean Cultural Center devoted a Special Double Issue of their former *Caribe* journal to examining Black Dance. This edition was published by Dr. Marta Moreno Vega, edited by Duane L. Jones, and included essays by dancers, scholars, and choreographers such as Rex Nettleford, Alain Locke, Pearl Primus, Veve Clark, Robert Farris Thompson, Henry Frank, The National Dance Theatre of Jamaica, and more. There was also a portfolio of photographs published that included footage of Pearl Primus, Katherine Dunham, The Hines Brothers, Geoffrey Holder, and others.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, not publishing another Black Studies journal devoted to African/Black Dance in 28 years is unacceptable. Yet, this extreme gap in time proves just how much this body of knowledge has been neglected, and explains exactly why it must be resurrected and rebirthed right here, right now.

Therefore, we are blessed to include in this special edition both seasoned scholars in African/Black Dance and new and upcoming voices. The inclusion of scholars from several different generations allows our conversation on African/Black Dance to span across time and space by including the past, the present, and the future. The seasoned scholars included in this special edition who have already made significant contributions to the development of African/Black Dance both inside and outside the academy include: Thomas F. DeFrantz (author of *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance* and *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture*); Doris Green (author of *No Longer an Oral Tradition: My Journey Through Percussion Notation: The Autobiography of Doris Green, Creator of Greenotation*); Katrina Hazzard-Donald (author of *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture*); and Kariamu Welsh (author of *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry*, *Zimbabwe Dance: Ancestral Voices, Rhythmic Forces, an Aesthetic Analysis*, *The Umfundalai Dance Technique: The Shape of Rhythm*, and more).<sup>3</sup> The inclusion of several new and upcoming scholars in African/Black Dance is also important because it ensures this conversation is constantly moving forward and that the past is harmoniously balanced with the future.

Consequently, this special edition begins by exploring questions such as: "What is African/Black Dance?" "What was the role of African/Black Dance in the discipline of Black Studies in the past?" and "Why are universities reluctant to include courses on African/Black dance within their curriculum?" Hence, our first section includes an article by Takiyah Nur Amin entitled "Terminology of Difference: Making the Case for Black Dance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and Beyond." Nur Amin dedicates her entire article to discussing the diverse definitions of

African/Black Dance created by various dancers, scholars, and choreographers in the academic disciplines of both Dance and Black Studies. Next, we have Doris Green's article entitled "The Saga of African Dance and Black Studies Departments." As an elder who has been a dance practitioner in Black Studies since before its inception, Green's article recounts her many experiences and challenges in attempting to ensure that African/Black Dance has a place in the discipline of Black Studies. This is followed by Raquel L. Monroe's article entitled "'I Don't Want to do African...What About My Technique?': Transforming Dancing Places into Spaces in the Academy." Monroe discusses her own personal experiences with adding African Dance classes to a Dance department's curriculum, and her struggle to convince students of all cultural backgrounds that learning African Dance is just as important as training in ballet, jazz, and modern.

The next set of questions explored include: "What are the experiences of Black male and Black female dancers in the world of dance?" and "How have African/Black people contributed to various dance styles and genres?" Therefore, the second section begins with Thomas F. DeFrantz's article entitled "Theorizing Connectivities: African American Women in Concert Dance." DeFrantz discusses the many forgotten Black, female dancers and choreographers who performed on the concert stage and should be recognized for countless contributions to the world of Dance. Lawrence M. Jackson, one of the guest editors of this special edition, authors an article entitled "The Black Male Dancer Physique: An Object of White Desirability" exploring the Black, male body and how it has been interpreted and understood very differently on the concert stage by both Black and white audiences. And, "I Just Want to Get My Groove On: An African American Experience with Race, Racism, and the White Aesthetic in Dance" by Tracey Owens Patton is an auto-ethnographic editorial recounting her experiences with racism as a non professional dancer at several small, predominantly white, local dance studios.

Next, we explore articles on tap dance, CaribFunk, and Krumping. "Dancing with the Ghost of Minstrelsy: A Case Study of the Marginalization and Continued Survival of Rhythm Tap" by Donna-Marie Peters focuses on the African elements present in Rhythm Tap, a style of tap dance found in the Black community, and how this overshadows the co-option of tap by the white community in the form of minstrelsy. "CaribFunk Technique: Afro-Caribbean Feminism, Caribbean Dance and Popular Culture" by A'Keitha Carey introduces the reader to the intricacies of a new form of Afro-Caribbean Dance, entitled CaribFunk, originated by the author herself. Megan Anne Todd's article entitled "Aesthetic Foundations & Activist Strategies of Intervention in Rickerby Hinds' *Buckworld One*" explores the hip-hop style of Krumping as it is articulated in the movie *Rize* and the theatrical production *Buckworld One* by Rickerby Hinds performed in Tempe, Arizona in 2010.

The last two questions explored in this special edition are: “How can dance be used as a form of ritual throughout the Diaspora?” and “What is the future of African/Black Dance as a body of knowledge in the discipline of Black Studies?” Consequently, section three begins with the role dance plays in various rituals performed by African people from Africa to America with Mickie Mwanzia Koster’s article entitled “The *Kilumi* Rain Dance Ritual in Modern Kenya.” Koster centers her article around her ongoing ethnography focusing on uncovering the purpose, function, and continued necessity of rain dance rituals by the Wakamba people in South Central Kenya. “Hoodoo Religion and American Dance Traditions: Rethinking the Ring Shout” by Katrina Hazzard-Donald explores the many aspects of the Ring Shout, a dance performed by African people in early American history, and argues that this dance lays a foundation for all Black Dance that follows in the future.

The final two articles discuss how African/Black Dance can nurture one’s spirit in a way that can allow healing from any form of trauma. Kendra Unruh’s article entitled “From Kitchen Mechanics to ‘Jubilant Spirits of Freedom’: Black, Working-Class Women Dancing the Lindy Hop” uncovers the healing qualities of a popular dance known as the Lindy Hop for working class, Black Women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. “African Dance as Healing Modality throughout the Diaspora: The Use of Ritual Movement to Work through Trauma” by Nicole M. Monteiro and Diana J. Wall explores several different dances found throughout both Africa and America that can help African/Black people heal from the various forms of trauma they have endured.

This special edition concludes with an interview by Aimee Glocke, one of the guest editors, with Kariamu Welsh, world renowned dancer, choreographer, company director, scholar, writer, activist, and professor entitled, “When the Past Dances into the Future: An Interview with African-Centered Dance Scholar, Dr. Kariamu Welsh.” This interview pays homage to Welsh’s many accomplishments and contributions to both African/Black Dance and Black Studies, and offers her vision for the future of African/Black Dance as a body of knowledge in the discipline of Black Studies.

Overall, we received around 35 abstracts for this special edition and over a dozen of additional inquiries after the deadlines had passed from scholars, dancers, and choreographers from around the globe who were interested in contributing to this discussion on African/Black Dance. This tells us that many individuals from around the world are anxious and excited to discuss African/Black Dance and are just seeking an opportunity to do so. As demonstrated in the biographies of the authors included in this edition, scholarship is being produced and published on African/Black Dance, but it is being published in Dance and not in Black Studies. Therefore, it is time to bring this discussion home to an African-centered space where African/Black culture, including dance, can be discussed truthfully, honestly, and devoid of racism and white supremacy. We hope this special edition will spark new discussions and dialogue on African/Black Dance in the discipline of Black Studies (and beyond) resulting in new scholarly projects, articles, publications, journal editions, books, courses, tenure track positions, conference presentations, conferences, etc. We cannot wait another 28 years for Black

Studies to discuss African/Black Dance, especially since the ancestors and elders devoted too much time and energy into developing this body of knowledge in the past for us to not continue developing and honoring their work in the present. Ultimately, as dancers, choreographers, and scholars, we must always remember that every time we lindy hop; tour jete'; leap; chasse'; battement; releve'; contract; release; stomp or stamp; and krump, we truly are dancin' on the shoulders of our ancestors.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Marvin X for this information.

<sup>2</sup> Thank you to Shantrelle P. Lewis from the Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute (CCCADI) for this information.

<sup>3</sup> We want to thank Brenda Dixon Gottschild (author of *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, and *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era*) for also wanting to be a part of this project even though the deadline for her upcoming book prevented her from being able to do so.