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Choreographing Social Change: Reflections on *Dancing in Blackness*

Halifu Osumare

Introduction

In 2018 I published my memoir, *Dancing in Blackness*, learning much about myself and my career choices in the process. Unlike many people, dancers often live in the now, focusing on our movement work at hand, while moment by moment, the work ephemerally fleets into the past before our eyes. To take the time to reflect on "chapters" of one's work in dance is a daunting experiment, forcing examination of emerging career themes that one did not always have time to unpack as they revealed themselves in transitory dance creations and projects. As one who was not only a dancer/choreographer, but also an arts administrator, producer, researcher, and emerging scholar, my unpacking process became multilayered and particularly intense.

In the writing of my life's work, I learned I have been literally choreographing social change for the Black dancer-choreographer, and the Black woman in particular. I was conscious of creating a revisionist rhetoric and imaginary for Black dance and the cultural perceptions about Black dancers and dance makers, but I was not equally aware of the statement my life was making about shifting perceptions of the Black woman. Art critic Siddhartha Mitter had this to say about the Black female visual artist Lorna Simpson's 2019 exhibit in New York: "Her work, in spirit, proceeded from a feminist point of view that was natural and taken as a given with no need for polemics" (2019, C13). I could say the same about my perception of being a Black female dancer-activist.

Even as a woman in the sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties, I assumed I could accomplish anything my mind could conceive, and with arms flaring akimbo, I dared the world to say otherwise. I insinuated this challenge by literally and figuratively choreographing my version of social change through my reinterpreting and repositioning of Black dance. In this article, I revisit my memoir and discover yet more revelations about the themes emerging from my over-forty-year dance career, particularly as it relates to implicit Black "womanism" lodged in my work. The article, therefore, becomes a palimpsest, revealing new layers beyond the memoir, which build upon the past in Black dance's representations, and in the process show potential for future movement.

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Evolutionary Iterations of *The Evolution of Black Dance*

The major theme emerging in my career evolving across two decades and three continents was *The Evolution of Black Dance*, a scripted production that told the story of Black history from Africa to whatever the current dance craze was (e.g., the seventies bump, disco, hip-hop, etc.) through the art of dance. I positioned *Dance* as the central tool by which Black folks survived the devastations of the Middle Passage, slavery, Jim Crow segregation, the Jazz Age, and the post–civil rights era. Looking at this theme temporally and spatially reveals the extent to which using dance to explore the trajectory of African American history influenced my evolving self-definition, starting in my twenties and continuing into my fifties. Obviously, this meant that levels of knowledge, fieldwork across African diasporic performance, and discrete experiences of diasporic connections in the Black Dance field grew exponentially in these thirty years, shaping my own expressions of that history.

My first production exploring the theme of Black history came about after living three years in Europe and needing to rekindle my cultural roots upon returning to the United States. I had moved from Scandinavia to Boston, where I created a sprawling evening-length, forty-member-cast dance theater production titled *Changes, Or How Do You Get to Heaven When You're Already in Hell.* As I wrote in *Dancing in Blackness*, "Part 1 [was] 'The Big Conquest,' 'Ropes and Chains—Who Is the Victim?' and 'The Streets, Jim—Nothing Happenin', Baby!' The titles themselves give a sense of my inchoate attempt to capture our roots in Africa, the Middle Passage, and postslavery social and economic marginalization that would create the underground economy of urban street characters, today called the 'hood'" (2018, 87). Such a grand reentrance into the US dance scene, after initially establishing myself as a dance instructor and choreographer in Europe, demonstrated how important plummeting my racial and cultural roots was, even though it was much too ambitious for a twenty-five-year-old still learning her craft.

My second production examining this same theme was my one and only dramatic play, *Four Women: Images of the Black Woman in Monologue, Poetry, Song, and Dance*. This theater piece was based on the concept of the song "Four Women," which Nina Simone had made famous on her 1966 album, *Wild Is the Wind*, vividly portraying four archetypes of Black women. The play, produced in my home area of the Oakland-Berkeley-San Francisco Bay Area in 1973 after returning from the East Coast, employed four actresses. One of the actors was my dance student and friend, Ntozake Shange, appearing just a few years before the New York premiere of her famed *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf*. The four female performers dramatized my script while moving to the live music accompanying the production. Although I primarily played the role of director, I did choreograph a dance solo for myself to the famed spiritual "Motherless Child." *Four Women* was one of the few times that I consciously created a rapprochement between race and gender, focusing on the plight of the Black woman in my evolving historical theme. This production represented my participation in the growing Black Arts Movement-West that became a seminal period in American performing arts, producing New York institutions like Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theatre, Douglas Turner Ward's Negro Ensemble Company, and Woodie King Jr.'s New Federal Theatre.

The first scripting and performing of a piece I actually titled *The Evolution of Black Dance* happened in the Bay Area in 1974 and 1975. As I wrote in my memoir,

> *The Evolution of Black Dance* had been building within me since the Boston production of "Changes." That earlier production had delved into Black history through dance, but now I wanted to solely focus on how dance played a significant role in Black historical survival. Recreating what I considered to be African principles of dance and music became my raison d'etre. (2018, 165)

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THE BLACK PANTHER, SATURDAY, OCTOBER 27,1973 PAGE 17

ENTERTAINMENT & SPORTS

"FOUR WOMEN"-EXCITING, INVENTIVE, INSIGHTFUL THEATER

(Berkeley, Calif.) - *Four Women*, subtitled "Images of the Black Woman in monolog, poetry, song and dance", is exciting, inventive and insightful theater. Our most enthusiastic plaudits go to Sister Halifu (Janis Miller) who conceived and wrote *'Four Women*, directed this production and performed a strikingly emotive solo dance number.

The cast of five sisters is tastefully and artfully supported and accompanied by six brothers on piano, flute, saxaphone, bass, congas and a variety of other percussion instruments. A bare stage is brought alive with the generally excellent acting, the imaginative direction and colorful costumes.

But it is the spoken word that dominates this evening of theater. The mood is set with appropriately scratchy recordings of Billie Holiday singing "Some Other Spring", followed by the bluesy "He's Got Me Going" of the incomparable Bessie Smith.

Views of ways this society has forced Black women to survive constitute the first half of *Four Women*. The play girl, "I loves to party . . . ", the streetwalker, "... . . lovin' is my game . . ." and the junkie, "I been down so long I got to look up at the ground...", tell it like it is with understanding, self-effacing honesty, humor and great energy.

MOD JETSETTER

The mod jetsetter does a full-bodied monolog that argues ". . . style is the most important way to

"Four Women" brilliantly portrayed the struggle, joys and strengths of Black women in America

The JuJu woman evokes ancestral roots with a chant that begins, "With me comes the voice of Mother Africa". A bent and barefoot slave woman laments, "All I know is, a change has gotta come. . ." And, suddenly, we are back in a Black church.

A moving rendition of "Sometimes I Feel Like A Motherless Child", is built into joyous gospel sounds of hallelujahs, tambourines and shouts, together with snatches of "When I Lay My Burden Down" and "Precious Lord". And, out from the celebrants steps a young, "revolutionary" woman whose sermon text is ". . . If we all link hands together, we can stand up . . . "

A packed auditorium at Rainbow Sign, in Berkeley, gave the sisters and the brothers a well deserved,

Photo 1 Review of Four Women: Images of the Black Women in Monologue, Song, and Dance *in 1973 issue of* The Black Panther.

Evolution was not a dance concert but rather a researched lecture-demonstration that also utilized my developing writing skills. The research for the project was a part of my graduating thesis for my BA at University Without Walls, Berkeley, my advisor for which was the late Black feminist literary critic Barbara Christian. *Evolution* premiered at Berkeley High School on October 30, 1974, for school administrators and teachers through the high school's African American Studies Department, one of the first in the country. After that success, I began booking performances of *Evolution* in public schools throughout the Bay Area through my newly formed administrative arm, Halifu Productions, revealing early on the organizational skills accompanying my artistic passions.

Revisiting these initial forays into presenting my artistic works, I am reminded of how my administrative and research skills were already merging with my artistic creativity, allowing me to *produce* my own work. I realize even more now, in hindsight, how I never depended on the lager white dance scene. I intuited early on that the mainstream dance field in the 1970s was not necessarily

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interested in Black choreographer's output, particularly those of us producing work centered on the Black experience itself.

Although I was unaware of it, the school version of *Evolution* also made a feminist statement. I used three multitalented female dancer-performers for the school version of *Evolution*: Ntozake Shange, Elvia Marta, an excellent dancer originally from Panama, and Aisha Kahlil, who later became a singer in the famed a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock. Ntozake would write in the introduction to the published version of *For Colored Girls*:

> The first experience of women's theater for me as a performer was the months I spent with Halifu Osumare's The Spirit of Dance [*Evolution* misnamed], a troupe of five to six Black women who depicted the history of Black dance from its origins in Western Africa thru to the popular dances seen on our streets. Without a premeditated or conscious desire to create a female piece, that's what, in fact, Halifu did. After seventy-three performances with The Spirit of Dance, I left the company to begin production of *for colored girls.* (Shange 1977, xv–xvi)

If fact, my unconscious feminism, or Black womanism, became a model for Ntozake, who was soon to become one of the world's most touted Black feminist when her unique choreopoem, *For Colored Girls*, would be the second serious drama by a Black female on Broadway in 1976. My natural taken-for-granted Black feminism was an unintended effect of my Black history explorations through dance. Reflecting backward, I realize how much the Black woman has been at the core of change for the race, from the Underground Railroad and abolitionist movement (Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth) to the civil rights movement (Fannie Lou Hammer and Ella Baker). I now know that I was following that tradition of Black women through my focus on Black community education and empowerment through dance in my *Evolution*, which I was always consciously and purposefully orchestrating.

I extended this lecture-demonstration school format into a full theatrical dance production with *I Believe* during May 1975 in San Francisco and Oakland. This version included some of the best Black *male* dancers in the Bay Area as well: Raymond Sawyer, Raymond Johnson, and Jose Lorenzo, one our first Brazilian dancers. Premiering at formal community theaters, *I Believe* was also performed at the Black Panthers headquarters as a part of their Son of Man Temple Community Forum. It was important for me to link my artistic work to Black Panthers political activism, and the renowned Black militant organization fully embraced *Evolution*, publishing an advance article about *I Believe* in their newspaper:

> Asked why she decided to take her program into the schools, Halifu replied: "Today we see our young people, especially in the lower school levels, less and less connected to their history and to current social movements—the dynamics of happenings now. When I was in school (during the sixties) protest was part of everyday, on many levels. There was no way to escape involvement." (*The Black Panther* 1975, 21)

Here, I exposed my growing activism as part of the Black cultural revolution that began in the late sixties, focusing on knowing Black history. More importantly, I used dance as a tool on the concert stage to accomplish another kind of political engagement. Given my rebellious nature and the revolutionary time and place I came of age—the sixties San Francisco/Oakland Bay Area—I became a part of the fight for a revisionist history. After all, I had been at the precipice of the protest for Black studies at San Francisco State University in 1968, the first in the country. I couldn't avoid using my art to speak to the need for social justice—to literally choreograph social change.

The need for social change comes from a fierce love beginning with one's own family and extending into the Black and brown communities in an attempt to rectify the injurious history and many

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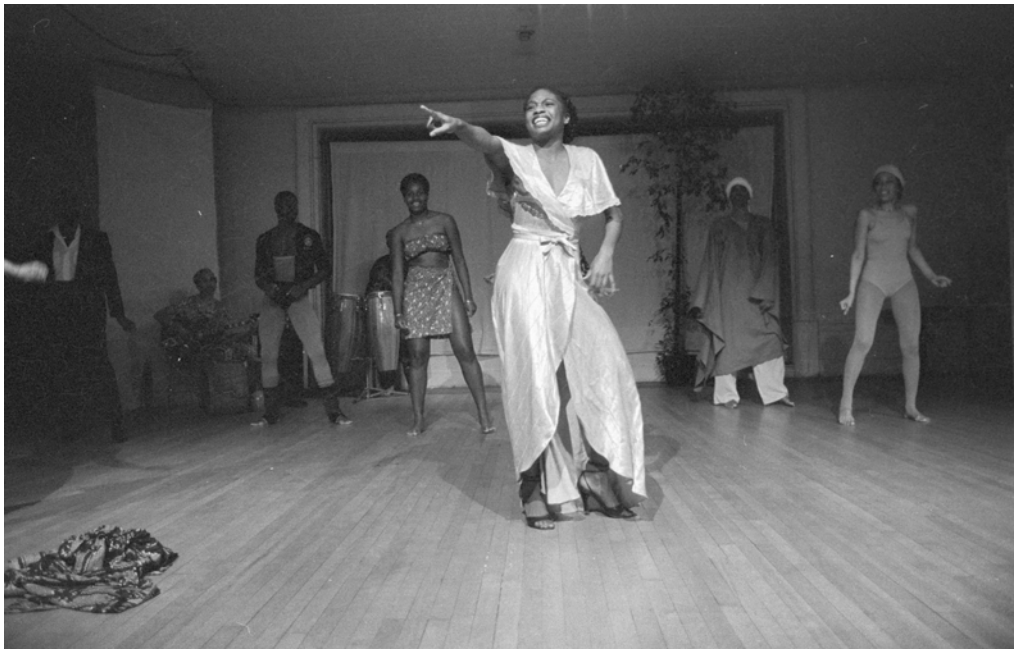

Photo 2 African dance scene from Middle Passage: The Beat of the African American Journey, Honolulu, *Hawai'i 1998. Photo from author's archives.*

injustices. This kind of devotional love is at the basis of today's Black Lives Matter movement, and the continuing assessment of the Black plight in the twenty-first century. When writing to his son, social critic Ta-Nehisi Coates eloquently captures the idea of family-extending-into-community love:

> Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have, and you come to us endangered. I think we would like to kill you ourselves before seeing you killed by the streets that America made. That is a philosophy of the disembodied, of a people who control nothing, who can protect nothing, who are made to fear not just the criminals among them but the police who lord over them with all the moral authority of a protection racket. It was only after you that I understood this love, that I understood the grip of my mother's hand. (Coates 2015, 82–83)

It was precisely this kind of love evolving out of a "philosophy of the disembodied" that I was trying to invoke with *The Evolution of Black Dance*, particularly in my public school performances for youths. I attempted to empower young people by "reembodying" the next Black generation with the history of their inherited resilience through dance and music.

As my signature dance production, *Evolution* morphed several times after that beginning period into various dance history productions, depending upon the time and place. In 1976 I went to Africa as the source of Black dance, and lived in Ghana for nine months studying the various ethnic dances of that country. I studied in the formal classes organized by the then School of Music, Dance, and Drama (SMDD) at the University of Ghana, Legon, and supplemented my study by traveling throughout the ten regions of the country, observing the traditional dances in their indigenous settings, and dancing with the people. I danced adowa with the Ashanti at a funeral outside of Kumasi, the agbadza with the Ewe in the Volta Region, and gonje with the Dagomba people of Tamale in the Northern Region. My Ghanaian sojourn became the needed grounding in various ethnic sources of Black dance that deepened my knowledge of

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the connections and resonances through the body by African-descendant people throughout the world.

My sincerity and hard work impressed the late Professor Kwabena Nketia, world renowned ethnomusicologist and then director of the SMDD at Legon, and he hired me to teach African American dance. I taught at the university during the fall 1976 semester, my last three months in the country. This gave me a chance to stage *Evolution* from an African perspective, which I did with the Ghanaian students who eagerly took my classes. They learned everything from the 1920s Charleston to the 1970s bump social dance, made famous in the United States on the *Soul Train* television show. Once the Ghanaian dancers saw the latter dance, they collectively yelled, "That's touré from Bamaya," a dance from Northern Ghana. This kind of dance endorsement occurred frequently, validating the entire diasporic resonance foundation of *Evolution*. I recorded the following, in *Dancing in Blackness*, about my production of *Evolution* at the University of Ghana:

> Everything that I had been working for in Ghana came to pass on December 17. My culminating experience—the Ghanaian presentation of *The Evolution of Black Dance*—took place in the Dance Hall of SMDD. I told my version of our story to Ghanaians using African American and Ghanaian artists, and it was a big success. The dance hall was packed with folding chairs, and every seat was filled. I put much of what I had learned about Ghanaian dance into it, including dancing *adowa* myself during the opening African section. Cheers and applause accompanied that solo as I validated Ghanaian dance as a "technique" that can be taught to anyone. Yao Tamaklo [the late Ronny Marshall], performed part of the Ewe *agbekor*, as well as a full tap dance solo in the 1930s American [swing] section. The Ghanaian audience was mesmerized, and I felt validated that they got the message—that they understood their cultural connections to us as African diasporans. (Osumare 2018, 235–236)

After my Ghanaian production, my last iteration of *Evolution* was in Hawai'i, after I had moved there with my first husband to work on a doctorate in American studies. Almost twenty years later in 1995, I began booking a theatrical production that became yet another version of my Black history theme, and this time I titled it *Middle Passage: The Beat of the African American Journey*. I perceived this rendering as a way of teaching the people of the Hawaiian Islands about my culture. Without a full-time job while working on my doctorate, I also needed earned income. The basis of the written script of *Middle Passage* was already embedded in *Evolution*, which needed updating after two decades. As people in the islands knew very little about the cultural history of African Americans, I knew this kind of "edutainment" production was needed and could easily make money, fulfilling my two motivations.

Although I previously used *dancers* to tell the historical journey, on the Big Island of Hawai'i I realized there were few professionally trained dancers available. I, therefore, decided instead to use what was at hand: an abundance of musicians. My husband Kimathi was enthusiastic about being a part of *Middle Passage*, which gave him an opportunity to play his bass guitar and percussion instruments, as he desperately needed to balance his stressful high school teaching job with his music. Two other Black musicians filled out the four-member roster of *Middle Passage*: saxophonist Ramu Khensu-Ra, originally from the Bay Area, and Reggae McGowan, a master drummer who had lived in Hawai'i for many years and accompanied my dance classes on the Big Island and in Honolulu. I decided to focus on a one-hour scripted show that could easily be booked into the schools on several islands; we eventually performed the show on all four major islands. With these three Black male musicians and me, as the sole female conceiver, producer, and performer, I started creating what was publicized as "The story of the joyous, mournful, and courageous history of African peoples in the United States."

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Photo 3 Scene from The Evolution of Black Dance*, Oakland, California, 1980. Photo from author's archives.*

I incorporated all of my cultural, historical, and experiential knowledge as researcher and artist into *Middle Passage.* The production contained everything from Yoruba chants to the plantation ring shout, from the 1930s "Shorty George" dance of the Savoy Ballroom to hip-hop dance, including the then popular "running man" step. I utilized live music in *Middle Passage* everywhere I could within the different eras, from Africa to contemporary times, and that aural focus proved to be powerful. Live music enabled me to occasionally use musical interludes, without dance, as representations of a historical period. For example, after the opening Yoruba chant that appropriately invoked Esu-Elegbara, the deity of the crossroads, along with the Ghanaian kpanlogo dance that Khensu-Ra and I performed to Reggae's drums, all three musicians then played an avant-garde jazz section that invoked disjointed chaos to represent the horror of the journey of the transatlantic slave trade, or Middle Passage. Kimathi composed this piece of music, which began with a rhythmic bass riff into which Reggae fit a conga drum rhythm, and Khensu-Ra added the "chaos" of saxophone screams and moans. While this musical representation of the Middle Passage played out, I was offstage changing my costume from African dress to a colonial slave costume of long skirt, ragged blouse, and head tie. As the Middle Passage musical interlude died down, I walked back onstage to deliver my scripted lines about the horror of slavery. Music, rather than dance, conveyed the tragic transition in the African American story.

Over the course of twenty-five years and several continents, the concept of Black history through dance began with *Evolution* and *I Believe*, and continued into *Middle Passage*. This artistic trajectory reflected the evolution in my intellectual knowledge, artistic creativity, and life experiences. I finally put iterations of *Evolution* to rest as I moved further into my role as scholar and academic. However, what did not change was my need to *choreograph* social change in whatever undertaking I engaged. Becoming an academic provided another tool to engender critical thinking underpinning social change. However, even before that major professional transition, my choreography intersected with coordinating, convincing, and inspiring artists, presenters, scholars, and audiences as an arts producer.

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Prescience of Black Choreographers Moving Toward the 21st Century

Although I am a product of the time and place in which I came of age—the late 1960s in the San Francisco/Oakland Bay Area—in some ways I was also ahead of my time. Prescience is foresight or foreknowledge of things or events to come. My national dance initiative, Black Choreographers Moving Toward the 21st Century (BCM), beginning in 1989, demonstrated a kind of prescience that presaged the efforts of choreographers of African descent in the1990s and early 2000s. I prepared myself to produce such a national dance initiative by first being a participating panelist in the American Dance Festival's (ADF) Black Traditions in American Modern Dance project that started on the Duke University campus in 1988. To conceive and command such a large scale initiative as BCM, which eventually happened in three California cities—San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego—I had to learn how to successfully produce a comprehensive arts project that included presenting professional dance concerts, humanities panel discussions, and community outreach programs. However, my training had begun even earlier than the ADF project, as I assessed in *Dancing in Blackness*:

> I had been [first] sensitized to this level of Black dance organizing and its potential impact by my participation in [the 1983] Dance Black America [festival at Brooklyn Academy of Music], but I still needed more training regarding *how* to combine the arts and humanities—Black dance performance and its contextual issues—as well as how to position them into a cohesive frame. This necessary education came with the American Dance Festival's Black Traditions in American Modern Dance project. (Osumare 2018, 235–236)

Although I had been the executive artistic director of my own community dance studio—Everybody's Creative Arts Center/CitiCentre Dance Theatre—from 1977 to 1986 in Oakland, ADF prompted a major transition for me: becoming a national arts administrator at age forty-two, transitioning from dancer-choreographer to producer.

The ADF Black dance project had the great living choreographers of the twentieth century—Talley Beatty, Donald McKayle, Eleo Pomare, Pearl Primus[1]—as well as the prominent scholars of Black dance and history. The choreographers' masterworks—Primus's *Strange Fruit* (1943), McKayle's *Rainbow Round My Shoulder* (1959), Beatty's *Come and Get the Beauty of It Hot* (1960), Pomare's *Les Desenamordas* (1967)—were restaged by the major regional Black dance companies: The Philadelphia Dance Company, Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Theatre, etc. The humanities scholars, who dialogued with the choreographers, consisted of the late Richard Long from Emory University, Brenda Dixon Gottschild from Temple University, the late journalist William Moore, and the elder statesman of Black dance history and archives, Joe Nash. These panelists provided the scholarly context that made the Black Traditions in American Modern Dance project a rich, full, and wholistic experience.

The ADF humanities component was coordinated by philosophy professor Gerald E. Myers, along with ADF Co-Director Stephanie Reinhart. Myers had the forethought to publish two monographs of scholarly essays documenting the entire project. *The Black Tradition in American Modern Dance* was published in 1988 and had an important essay by William Moore (1933–1992) titled "The Development of Black Modern Dance in America." The essay brilliantly positions Black dance within the larger context of the ubiquitous Black aesthetic influence, not only in the United States but in Europe as well. Moore argued for the existence of a typology of cultural and aesthetic barriers that needed to be overcome, as well as the advocacy of proactive artistic stances in order to establish a stronger critical base for Black modern dance. He analyzes:

> To establish a sturdy base to Black concert dance several things had to be accomplished: 1) an end had to be put to the myth that there was no African culture or

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> if it indeed did exist, it was mumbo jumbo, formless, and artless ranting (The Tarzan myth); 2) Black artists had to begin to explore the contemporary realities of African American culture and people in present settings; 3) the freedom and mobility to create from the total fabric of the Black experience had to be achieved, being the freedom of Black arts to create works within and outside of their specific African American heritage. (Moore 1990, 15)

The latter point alluded to Black choreographers not always being boxed into the established Black heritage—to have the freedom to choreograph *within* and *without* that cultural foundation. His focus on the freedom of Black choreographers was key for me and formed part of the foundation of my Black Choreographers Moving Toward the 21st Century project. Although I had built much of my choreographic career on hailing the resilience of Black heritage through dance, I also fought for the complete freedom of the Black dance maker to have the autonomy and self-determination to choreograph from any aesthetic she/he/they desired.

As I had cut my producing teeth, so to speak, on ADF's Black Traditions project, I developed a project proposal that focused on innovative contemporary Black choreographers, linking it to the ongoing question of what is Black dance: "How were contemporary young Black choreographers dealing with the Black dance legacy in the context of their own individual artistic statements moving toward a new century?" From the very beginning, I wanted BCM to focus on prominent and emerging dance makers and their individual artistic oeuvres rather than the conundrum of "Black dance" itself. One decade away from the new millennium, I felt it was time to make a national statement about the state of young *contemporary* Black choreographers, just as ADF had done with the older dance masters and their legacy that laid the foundation for all of us.

I should state here that the need to free Black choreographers from stereotypical cliché boxes of what should and should not be the subject of their work grows from the larger issue of the historic stereotyping of Black people and their culture in the United States, mapped, in turn, onto the cultural cartography of the world. Blackface minstrelsy, the first form of indigenous American theater that the world imitated in various forms, is a seminal example. Choreographers in the twenty-first century, such as Camille A. Brown, continue to grapple with this historic dilemma. Brown's evening-length dance theater work, *Mr. TOL E. RAncE* (2012), as her program notes says, "examines 'the mask' of survival and the 'double consciousness' (W. E. B. DuBois) of Black performers throughout history and the stereotypical roles dominating current popular Black culture." Here, she alludes to hip-hop culture and the conundrum of whether today's rap emcees ultimately play into various historic Black tropes in twenty-first-century identity representations. At the same time, Brown's *Black Girl: Linguistic Play* interrogates the complexity of Black female self-identity and our vulnerabilities through Black girls' street play and Black vernacular dance.[2] Today's twenty-first-century Black female choreographers still grapple with the extant issues of race and gender that their predecessors did in the latter decades of the twentieth century.

In 1988, I began deploying all of my accrued organizational acumen to develop the BCM model for the then current generation of Black choreographers. How were artists like Bill T. Jones, Blondell Cummings, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Garth Fagan, David Rousseve, and Bebe Miller negotiating the old Black dance conundrum and forging their own artistic paths? In late 1988, I took my proposal to Theater Artaud, one of the major theaters and dance presenters in San Francisco, to convince them to enter into an agreement with me to present the first BCM project in November 1989. The theater is part of Project Artaud, a pioneering arts complex in San Francisco's Mission District. Kim Fowler, then the executive director of Theater Artaud and who is African American, was receptive but initially skeptical about the possibility of funding for such an ambitious project with performances by nationally recognized dance companies, symposia, and outreach classes in the public schools. However, I wrote a successful proposal to the National Endowment for the Arts that was funded, convincing her to put the BCM project into the theater's 1989 season.

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However, my plans for BCM were more ambitious than just San Francisco. I wanted to make the project a *national* dance initiative, presenting the BCM Model also in Los Angeles as the other major California city. San Francisco was *my* town, and I had little experience with the southern city that we in Northern California call "Tinsel Town." My main LA contact was James Burks, producer of the African Marketplace and director of special projects with the City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs. When I took my proposal to him, he set up a meeting for me with the executive director of the most prestigious presenter in Los Angeles: then called UCLA Center for the Performing Arts. Along with James Burks, I remember entering Pebble Wadsworth's office at UCLA, wearing my best business suit, and leaving with a tentative yes to my BCM proposal. However, Pebbles, being very politically savvy, suggested that the Black community would respond more favorably if UCLA collaborated with a smaller Black arts presenter. She suggested producer Neil Barclay's First Impressions Performances, and Neil, Pebbles, and I met and constructed a collaborative deal that worked for Los Angeles.

With my Black woman confidence coupled with key administrative contacts, BCM became a unique three-city dance project, eventually adding SUSHI Performance and Visual Art Gallery in San Diego. With me as executive producer and humanities coordinator, and Theater Artaud, First Impressions Performances, and SUSHI Gallery as presenters, dance companies headed by Black choreographers from throughout the United States were presented, garnering much media attention and audiences. BCM continued annually until 1995, presenting a strong agenda that Black dance cannot be categorized or stereotyped but is as varied as its artists.

After finishing my master's degree in dance ethnology in the early nineties at San Francisco State University, I wrote an important chapter in ADF's second humanities booklet, *African American Genius in Modern Dance* (1993), which was dedicated to the recently deceased William Moore. In my essay, "The New Moderns: The Paradox of Eclecticism and Singularity," I argued for the importance of the aesthetics of the young choreographers of the 1980s who were engaged in so-called postmodern dance but who were, in fact, connected to the legacy of the Black tradition in modern dance. I explored some of the artists I produced in my BCM project, arguing that their aesthetics might be eclectic, but they remained connected to the historical map of the Black legacy in dance. They were proving William Moore's admonition that Black choreographers had the right to create their works within and without the Black heritage.

"The New Moderns" explored the autobiographical approach of many of the eighties and nineties choreographers who situated the personal as political. The late Blondell Cumming's *Chicken Soup* (1981) is a perfect example, with her use of mime and gesture, as opposed to formal dance technique:

> Exploring the metaphor of kitchen and chicken soup, [Blondell] had tapped into her family—a Black family, with its individual reflection of the Black experience and the centrality of family in that experience.... An individual exploration had indeed become a cultural statement, whether intentional or not.... It was a different approach than Alvin Ailey's early nineteen seventies *Cry, For All Black Women Everywhere, Especially Our Mothers.* (Osumare 1993, 27)

Blondell Cumming's generation of Black choreographers were utilizing new innovative kinesthetic approaches and multimedia to explore the human experience from their personal and cultural perspectives.

I surveyed several Black choreographers' works in the article, many of whom performed in my BCM project. Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's Urban Bush Women performed her *Lipstick* (1990) and *Shelter* (1992) at Theater Artaud, and two dancers from the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company performed a duet from *D-Man in the Waters* (1989) in Los Angeles. David Rousseve's dance theater

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piece *Colored Children Flyin' By* (1990) premiered in BCM in Los Angeles, and BeBe Miller's *Hendrix Project* (1991) was brought to Theater Artaud. All of these dance pieces were challenging, probing works that stretched the boundaries of accepted dance techniques, pushing the developing postmodern exploration.

In "The New Moderns," I also interrogated Bill T. Jones's groundbreaking evening-length *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land* (1991), with its examination of the legacy of American racism, juxtaposing that work with Pearl Primus's 1943 *Hard Times Blues* and Talley Beatty's 1947 *Mourner's Bench* (the latter about a section in the rural Black church set aside for those mourning the victims of lynching). One perceives that Jones's aesthetic used a different nineties dance theater approach; however, all these Black choreographers, straddled across two generations, were exploring the historical context of their racial plight that could not be escaped. I conclude the article with the following:

> While all of these choreographers cling fiercely to their individuality and singular voice as artists, they are indeed a part of a continuum of Black choreographers which has always included celebration of dance itself, as well as social and cultural statements through their art.. . . Taken as a collective, today's Black choreographers are extremely eclectic, yet they remain concerned with our humanity. They often use their art to expose its every attempted degradation, responding to the demands of our times just as their predecessors. (29)

Black Choreographers Moving Toward the 21st Century was indeed prescient in foreseeing the need for this exploratory platform for emerging Black choreographers. BCM not only presented these new aesthetics and works by the younger generation of choreographers, but the project also provided interrogation of their place in the ongoing pantheon of Black dance artists. I had begun to extend my own Black woman's voice, arms still akimbo, by combining dance and the humanities in a more erudite and academic approach that was now reaching an even wider audience.

Reflections

After publishing *Dancing in Blackness*, I realize there are yet more reflections about my combined dancing, producing, and publishing career to be had, and this article allows me to expand my memoir ruminations. These extended reflections, not in the memoir, go beyond dancing and dance making to the dance of life itself. However, I did say the following in the introduction to my memoir:

> Indeed, my second career as popular culture scholar is deeply informed by my experience as a dancer-choreographer with its emphasis on Black history through dance. I may have stopped dance performance physically, but I now embrace Katherine Dunham's concept that one should never stop "dancing" even when incapacitated, as she was in a wheelchair during her last fifteen years. As I have aged, I recognize how I was using the principles of dance—rhythm, shape, space, and dynamics—as I interacted with every aspect of my life in the world. I began to realize how knowing what to say at the right time (rhythm), in the right way (shape and dynamics), and in the correct place (space) create the *choreography* of life itself. (3)

The relationship of dance to one's life is a central connection that allows one to confidently make the choices that chart one's career. In my case, those choices were indeed enhanced by other Black women who also understood this vital connection.

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My recognition of life being a dance was partially innate, yet significantly reinforced by one of the great Black female dancer-chorographers: Katherine Dunham. Her creative and spiritual mentorship from 1987 until her death in 2006 was one of my greatest gifts. I was able to observe in her a Black woman who set the model for the artist-scholar, revealing how to traverse racism, sexism, classism, and even ageism. She triumphantly emerged as a living sage in her later years, ever expanding her gift to the world—the Dunham Technique—that philosophically reaches far beyond physically dancing. During Dunham's community arts period in East St. Louis, Illinois, starting in the midsixties after she disbanded the famous Katherine Dunham Dance Company, she wrote about the larger purpose of her Performing Arts Training Center in that economically depressed city: "In our capsule of arts training here in East Saint Louis, we have seen art serve as one of the methods of arousing awareness, of stimulating life to be thinking, observant, comparative, not automatic; of surpassing alienation, and of serving as a rational alternative to violence and genocide" (2005, 551). In Katherine Dunham I found a true role model of an artist's life focused on service—concentrating one's creativity on humanity's advancement.

Another Black woman dancer who has been an inspiration from *afar* is Judith Jamison. We only met once in the 1970s through a mutual friend and former member of the Ailey company, the late Consuelo Atlas. However, I always admired Judith's approach to dancing and to directing the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater as Ailey's heir apparent. Her straightforward, direct method to the dancing spirit, and the populist Ailey legacy, always inspired me. She reflected on that legacy in her own memoir, *Dancing Spirit* (1993):

> Alvin said that you entertain and you educate. You show people that dancers are not just bodies onstage doing steps. Alvin wanted to have something deeper going on than the magic that happens onstage, so we started doing residencies in the school systems. Our dancers understand that this is a two-way street. They're not just sharing their gifts onstage. When you teach a child, it helps you to remember that at one point in *your* life you didn't know your left foot from your right. It brings a certain humility. (262)

That Ailey and Jamison wanted their dancers to connect with their audience, particularly the youth through their school outreach programs, echoes my dance career approach. During my tenure as director of CitiCentre Dance Theatre in Oakland, I programmed and implemented summer youth programs using dance and theater, all for Oakland's young people. Later, it was also important for me to have the school outreach programs as a part of the BCM model, so our nationally recognized Black choreographers could work with the youth in the public schools. Today, I have older women—former dance students with children and grandchildren—tell me how much my artistic work in the Bay Area changed their lives and directed how they raised their families with the performing arts as central. Community arts activism was a part of my career, beyond the stage, and it has given me a sense of service and humility.

Jamison finishes her memoir in a manner reminiscent of the old 1920s gospel song "This Little Light of Mine":

> There's only one of you on earth. Isn't *that* wonderful? You should be able to celebrate that fact and you should be able to share it. What we try to convey to young people is that there is not a pomposity about accomplishment, but there should be a generosity about it. Yes, feel free to make mistakes in class and stumble in class, but learn your craft. Learn the craft of knowing how to open your heart and how to turn on your creativity. There's a light inside of you. (1993, 262)

Although I am proud of my career successes as a dancer-choreographer, arts administrator-producer, and finally an academic scholar, these accomplishments are more meaningful because

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of reciprocation—the exchange process engaged in by beneficiaries, be they audience members, dance students, readers, or an entire community. In the end, giving and receiving art as it passes from human to human is what really makes sense and forms the foundation for all work in the arts.

I am grateful to all my audiences, whether in an auditorium, a studio, a classroom, or the solitude of one's own home while reading my writings. Their receiving allows me to better know myself—my own light—as my work is experienced in the myriad of ways that each individual can experience it. My discrete understanding of how my own career experiences indeed become a palimpsest, the layers of which I continue to peel back to discover my Black dance past to help build a more equitable future. True artists understand reciprocation between performer and audience as part of the creative process. I dare say that Black women have a particular understanding of this process, holding the (dance) family together through all our historical tests that forge our particular kind of spiritual resilience.

Notes

1. Katherine Dunham was an obvious choreographic omission; however, the reason she was not included in the ADF Black Traditions project was that Alvin Ailey had very recently produced *The Magic of Katherine Dunham* in 1987. He spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on the fourteen-ballet revival evening, and the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater was touring it as a part of their season.

2. It should be noted that the award-winning Camille A. Brown is the choreographer of the 2019 revival of Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who've Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow is Enuf* at its original 1975 off-Broadway venue.

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